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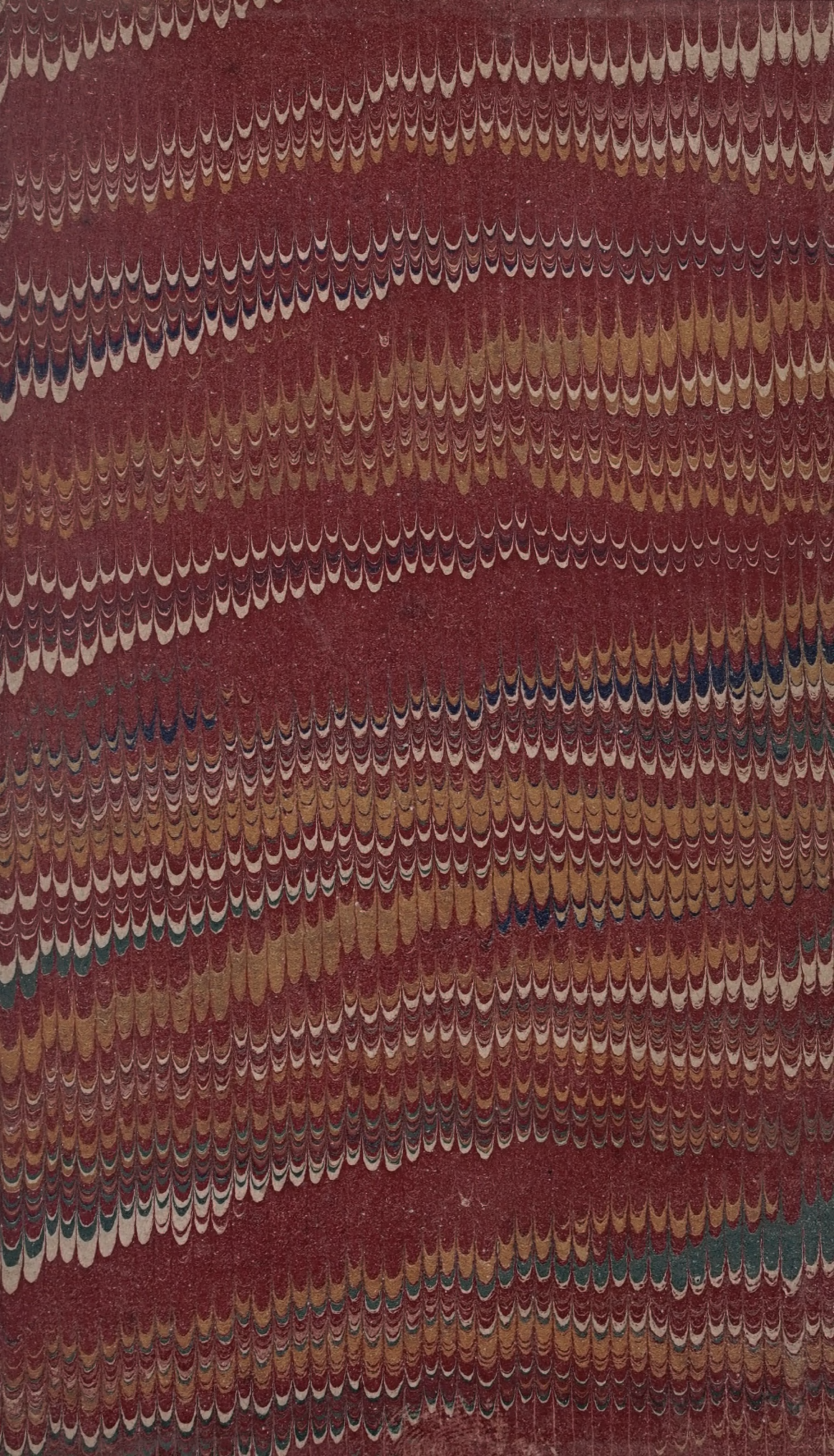
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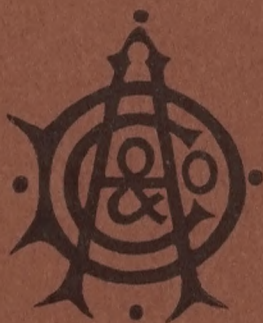
THE HOUSE

OF THE

TWO BARBELS.

BY

ANDRÉ THEURIET.



NEW YORK:  
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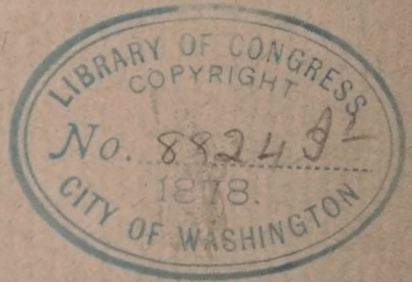


APPLETONS' NEW HANDY-VOLUME SERIES. v. 8

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# THE HOUSE OF THE TWO BARBELS.

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## CHAPTER I.

IN 1860 the commercial title "Lafrogne Father & Sons, Druggists of Villotte," was still printed at the head of the bills of the house, although for many years Lafrogne the father had slept under the tall, waving grass in the cemetery Ste.-Marguérite. This establishment was well patronized, and was known throughout the Barrois under the name of "The Shop of the Two Barbels," thanks to the ingenious idea of the elder Lafrogne, who had adopted as a sign the arms of Villotte—"two barbels back to back on an azure field strewn with small gold crosses." \*

Situated in the Rue du Bourg, a part of the town where there were as many dwelling-houses as shops, the Maison Lafrogne is to-day as pure a specimen of Lorraine architecture of the sixteenth

\* A barbel is a large fresh-water fish, of the carp species, having on either side of the mouth two beard-like appendages, whence its name.



century as is to be found in France. The façade is built of granite from Savonnières, and has acquired, with time, warm tones of the most exquisite gray. The door is of solid wood, delicately carved, and ornamented with a huge iron knocker, and is set in a deep arch, the key of which is a cherub, with inflated cheeks. Above the arch is an entablature, where were once carved the arms of the seigneur, but now displaying only a prosaic number. Under the windows are sirens sculptured in high-relief. Their swelling busts and laughing faces emerge from a tangle of vine-leaves, and support on their delicate heads the sloping sills. To connect the details of this exquisite ornamentation, and to make of them an harmonious whole, light fluted pilasters divide the casements into small, greenish squares. Upon their Corinthian capitals rests the frieze of an attic pierced by dormer-windows ; while above, again, runs a cornice, whose two extremities finish with stone gutters, which on stormy days unceremoniously pour down a steady stream of water upon the unlucky passers-by in the street below.

The building consists of two distinct parts, separated by an inner court. In 1860 the portion fronting on the Rue du Bourg was reserved as a dwelling-house, while that in the rear, communicating with the Rue de la Municipalité, was devoted to the presses and the stills, and above all



to the shop, which occupied the entire first floor. Large, dark, but well-ventilated apartments opened one into another. All were lined with shelves and deep drawers. Two massive counters ran up and down the rooms, while near the walls stood huge casks filled to the brim with everything known to the pharmacopœia—gamboge, copperas, Brazil-wood, madder, camomile-flowers, and jujubes. From the ceiling hung fagots of liquorice and bunches of wormwood and honey-wort, interspersed with gigantic masses of iris-root and poppy-heads.

When the sun found its way through the dusty windows and cast its rays obliquely on these lifeless branches, a cloud of fragrant atoms arose from every corner, filling the room with foreign odors and strange colors. From a half-open drawer came the faint, aromatic smell of vanilla, or a whiff of musk, arousing strange dreams of the far-away Antilles and of the marvelous flora of the East Indies.

But, to tell the truth, there was little dreaming in this "*House of the Two Barbels*." The sons of Claude Lafrogne were not inclined to such idle waste of time. The eldest, Hyacinthe, was in the fifties; while Germain, the younger, was nearly forty. Never having married, they resided with their aunt Lénette (diminutive of Madeleine), a hearty old lady of seventy-two, an old maid, and the sister of their mother, who had



rocked them in their cradles, and had brought them up ; teaching them their catechism and watching over them in sickness and in health with the utmost devotion. Mademoiselle Lénette was the main-spring of the house ; she kept all the keys, paid all the bills, ordered the meals, and, in fact, assumed the whole responsibility of the household. She was tall and thin, and perfectly erect, quick in her movements, and fastidiously neat ; very religious, and exacting toward herself and others, always rising before daybreak, and never allowing her servants much time for gaping and lounging. In short, Aunt Lénette was a woman of great sense and judgment—much respected by her nephews, who never concluded any important step or business transaction without first consulting her.

Hyacinthe was her Benjamin, although he had disappointed the hopes and ambition of the family. At college he acquired a high reputation. His father cherished the hope of seeing his eldest son on the bench, and had sent him, at the age of twenty, to study law in Paris ; and, as Aunt Lénette could not make up her mind to abandon him, unprotected, to the temptations of that pernicious town, she had followed him there. Living in the rear of Saint-Sulpice, Rue du Caniver, obliged to pass through his aunt's room to enter his own, Hyacinthe had lived four years in Paris without suspecting either the dangers or the



pleasures of that great town. He returned to Villotte with his diploma, and with all the serene innocence of a youth who had seen the world only through the smoke of the incense burned at the altar of Saint-Sulpice. Ingenuous and diffident as a young girl, artless as a child, his simplicity was absolutely touching; he did not believe in the existence of evil. Duplicity and chicanery, and all tortuous ways, were sealed books to him—how, then, could he make even a respectable lawyer?

The history of Hyacinthe's only lawsuit is told in Villotte to this day as the best of jokes. He had been ordered to defend a woman accused of stealing a pair of hose. The offense was patent, the accused having been found in possession of the stolen goods. Hyacinthe nevertheless insisted on the innocence of his client.

"Gentlemen!" he exclaimed, in unfeigned emotion, "when Pharaoh, King of Egypt, sought for the cup of which he had been robbed, it was found in Benjamin's sack, and yet Benjamin was innocent. Such is the case with my client."

"Pardon me, M. Lafrogne," interrupted the president, who was not the most amiable of men. "Benjamin had not himself placed the cup in his sack, while your client had certainly put on the stockings. Your argument has a flaw in its foundation."

The bailiff, the clerk, and the attorneys, burst



into a roar of laughter, which so embarrassed the *débutant* that he stammered, and, cutting short his harangue, sat down, acutely mortified. The cause was argued, but Hyacinthe quitted the court-room, vowing to himself that never again would he cross its threshold. "Spices for spices," he said to his father, "I would rather sell them than receive them!" And this was the only remark he permitted himself.

At fifty he was little different from what he was at twenty-four. His hair was growing gray, but his cheeks were rosy, and his blue eyes had retained their boyish clearness and frankness of expression. He had never known any other woman than Aunt Lénette; he was afraid of the sex, and had never been able to make up his mind to marry. Domestic in his habits, and even something of a recluse, he was contented at home—kept the books, and occupied himself with the correspondence of the house, and amused himself in the evening by reading classical tragedies and romances of chivalry. Sometimes on Sundays he was to be seen after vespers on the banks of the canal, walking with his tall, slight figure somewhat bowed. He still wore, as in his childhood, slender gold rings in his ears; he was dressed in a long dark-brown redingote; his shirts, fashioned after an old mode, had ruffles on the front, laid in plaits, over which fell awkwardly the ends of a tumbled black cravat. His pantaloons of lasting



were so short that they showed his stockings knit by Mademoiselle Lénette, and his shoes with dangling strings ; in his whole appearance there was something quaint and old-fashioned ; the artlessness and irresolution of his character seemed to have imprinted themselves on his person and garments. Germain, the younger, was equally timid and shy, but in other respects of a totally different temperament. The brothers agreed on one point, however—in their aversion to matrimony. While they differed in tastes, character, and appearance, while Germain was an indefatigable pedestrian, and a keen lover of the chase, Hyacinthe was quiet, sedentary, loved his fireside like a domesticated cat, and shunned all noise and violent exercise. Germain was tall and broad-shouldered, fresh in color, with a full beard and quick eye, a nose like an eagle's beak, superb white teeth, and a loud, sonorous voice, as cheery as a bugle-call. All the time he could snatch from his business was devoted to hunting. From September to March his horn and the baying of his dogs resounded through the woods in the vicinity of Villotte. He had more knowledge of the world than Hyacinthe, and was therefore less virtuous. Gossiping tongues went so far as to say that escapades in the direction of Cytherea were not unusual with him, but on this point he was always most silent and reserved, and there is reason to believe that his gallant adventures were



nothing more than the brief amusements of a Nimrod.

These differences in character by no means prevented the brothers from living in entire unity. They created for themselves, with the addition of Aunt Lénette, a little world of three persons, quite enough they each thought. From the 1st of January to December 31st, their lives flowed on peaceably and methodically. In winter, when their shop was closed, they assembled in the dining-room, and waited before the crackling fire for supper to be served. Hyacinthe read, Germain cleaned his gun, while their aunt applied herself industriously to her knitting, and the only servant, Catherine, sat at her spinning-wheel in the same room with her masters.

On Sunday, Hyacinthe, who was very pious, went to high mass at Notre-Dame, with Aunt Lénette, who was arrayed in an antique garment of maroon-colored silk, and a white shawl with a border of many-colored palm-leaves; on their way home they stopped at the confectioner's in the Rue Entre-Deux-Ponts, and bought four hot *pâtés*, which invariably formed the extra of their Sunday dinner, and which Hyacinthe carried home with great care in a brown paper.

In summer, immediately after St.-John's-day, the aunt and Germain installed themselves at a small farm owned by the family at Rembercourt, on the shores of the Ornain, and about six kilo-



metres from the town. Mademoiselle Lénette passed the whole summer there, and made her sweetmeats and conserves, and dried her fruits, returning to Villotte in October, in time for the semi-annual wash.

The simple modesty of this regular life permitted the Lafrognes to lay aside a large part of their yearly income, which amounted to some twenty-five thousand francs, of which amount they expended barely six thousand ; and finally these accumulated revenues doubled their capital. The Villotte people had much to say in regard to the parsimonious habits of the two brothers : in their small social circle they were accused of being stingy, and were regarded as two bears whom it was useless to try to civilize ; but tradespeople, even while ridiculing the dress, habits, and manners of the brothers, respected them profoundly on account of their wealth and commercial solidity. And the lower classes, who have a singular aptitude in grasping the droll side of things, and characterizing with a word the foibles of their superiors, had given them the name of "The Two Barbels." This harmless witticism of the villagers did not rasp the epidermis of the Barbels. They let them laugh, and every Sunday, they, with their aunt, and an old friend of Hyacinthe's named Nivard, ridiculed in their turn the households of the small notaries and lawyers who ruined themselves with good living, while



their children went to school with holes in their stockings, and their grown daughters dressed Saint-Catherine's hair.\*

They found infinite consolation for all the jokes that were leveled at them in the sweet serenity of their quiet lives, which had been unclouded since the death of Lafrogne the elder.

Aunt Lénette spared them all household cares. They had no knowledge of the annoyances which poison the existence of bachelors. They found their linen always ready for them, and in perfect order ; their dinner served on the stroke of twelve ; their winter overcoats duly lined and quilted with the first frost ; and their linen clothes fresh and sweet, as soon as June suns poured down on the Rue du Bourg. They needed nothing ; every want was supplied and anticipated ; and, to complete their charmed existence, certain prosperous investments now secured them against the hazards of commercial enterprises and the dangers of revolutions.

Their farm at Rembercourt was most productive ; their timber-land in the Bois de Fains was the admiration of every one ; and their vineyard, lying in full sunshine on the hill-side, terminated in a protected ravine, which was called the *Cugnot*, where the reflection from the stone-walls on either side ripened oranges to perfection. Their vines yielded a *vin de Pineau* which, for delicacy

\* A French phrase for old maid.



of bouquet and depth of color, had no equal in the district.

Years slipped away in this calm contentment, when, one evening in March, 1862, a most unexpected event disturbed the tranquillity of this peaceful household—as a stone, thrown into a bush, frightens a flock of starlings who are calmly pecking there.

It was twilight, and Catherine had just brought in the lamp and placed it at Hyacinthe's side, who was reading the history of "*La Belle Mélusine*." Mademoiselle Lénette was laying the cloth; and Germain, who had just come in after a long tramp in search of woodcocks, was taking off his muddy gaiters, when a knock was heard at the street-door. In a few moments, Catherine, who had gone to open it, called from the end of the corridor:

"Madame, it is the postman, with a letter for you. He says that he wants eight sous, because too few stamps have been put upon it."

"Too few stamps!" exclaimed Germain. "Confound those stupid creatures who mail their letters without weighing them!"

"Shall I refuse to take it?" asked his aunt.

"By no means!" interposed the scrupulous Hyacinthe. "Never refuse a letter. I will go and see about it."

He disappeared into the darkness of the corridor, at the extremity of which the postman's lantern shone under the porch like a gigantic glow-



worm ; then, having paid the eight sous, he returned, bearing a large, square envelope with a wide, black border. "It is heavy, to be sure," he said ; "it has the Paris post-mark, and is addressed to you, aunt."

"How strange !" murmured the old maid, with a startled air. "Read it, Hyacinthe ; my spectacles are not here."

Hyacinthe tore open the envelope, and drew out a sheet of glossy paper as thick almost as pasteboard. "Upon my word," exclaimed Hyacinthe, "I am not astonished at the weight. What extravagance ! When persons indulge in such caprices," he grumbled, "they had best go to the additional expense of another stamp. What crazy writing !" he continued, as he drew nearer the light and began to read aloud :

"My dear relative—"

He stopped with an exclamation of astonishment, which was echoed by Germain, as well as by Mademoiselle Lénette, who was placing the plates on the table, and suddenly arrested her employment.

"Ah !" said she, "that letter must be from our cousin in Paris. Go on, Hyacinthe."

Hyacinthe resumed : "My dear relative : Although we are hardly known to each other, you will permit me to recall myself to your memory in the melancholy position in which I find myself. Perhaps you are ignorant of the blow that



has fallen upon us. My husband, Monsieur de Coulaines, died a year ago. When this affliction overwhelmed me, I was so utterly crushed by it that I delegated to friends the painful task of conveying the information to you, and it is possible that my subsequent letter failed to reach you. Will you excuse all these omissions?—and, although distance has for a long time interfered with our intercourse, I yet feel certain of the sympathy of my father's sister in all my trials; consequently, I venture to write to you and ask your advice.

“My poor husband, who was in trade, died leaving his affairs greatly involved; and, when things are all settled, my income will not exceed three thousand francs. This is very little, even in the country; but, in Paris, it is absolute poverty, particularly when, as is the case with myself, one has a daughter of eighteen. Laurence has just finished her examination at the Hôtel-de-Ville, and she has a diploma which will insure her finding a position almost anywhere as a teacher; but, while she is looking for a good situation, I must look out for the necessities of life, and I have resigned myself to leaving Paris and taking up my residence in the country. This decision finally arrived at, I naturally permitted my thoughts and wishes to turn toward the town where I was born, and where still reside some of my relatives. I come now, dear aunt, to entreat you to give me



the benefit of your advice and experience. I would like to find a small apartment, at once suitable and modest, at a rent of four hundred francs. My cousins, whose acquaintance I shall be most happy to make, will undoubtedly have little difficulty in finding such a place. I only await your reply to make my arrangements for moving my household goods ; intending, if it be favorable, to leave Paris with Laurence early in April.

“Pray excuse the liberty I take, and accept the affectionate regards of your niece—who embraces you most cordially, and also wishes to be remembered to her cousins.

“ROSINE DE COULAINES.”

A moment or two of absolute silence followed the reading of this letter, while Hyacinthe mechanically folded the paper, which crackled between his fingers.

“This is a pretty piece of business, upon my word !” suddenly exclaimed Germain. “Only Parisians could behave in this way ! A relative, whom we should not know from Eve, and with whom we have had no personal intercourse for thirty years, and certainly have not exchanged two letters in that length of time, appears in this sudden way !”

Mademoiselle Lénette did not reply. She was buried in thought, and with a slight frown on her brow, apparently seeking to recall some lost recollection.



“If these ladies should come to live at Villotte, we shall have to ask them here continually,” said Hyacinthe, a cold shiver running down his back at the idea of receiving the two Parisians.

“Throw the letter into the waste-basket, and forget all about it,” exclaimed Germain, with some excitement. “We have never seen them, and I really fail to see why we should allow ourselves to be completely upset by two absolute strangers—”

“They are your cousins—my brother Thoiré’s own children,” objected Mademoiselle Lénette, arousing herself suddenly from her meditation.

“But, Aunt Lénette, you never spoke to us of these cousins !”

“That is very true. I had, in fact, almost forgotten them. After his installation at Paris, my brother Edmond Thoiré forgot us for a time. His daughter married a Monsieur de Coulaines, a day-dreamer, whose head was full of wonderful inventions, and whose pocket was always empty. I remember that he once tried to borrow money from your father. Lafrogne refused point-blank, which, of course, caused a coolness between the two families, and finally they ceased to write. His widow and her child are not the less your nearest relatives, my children ; and, in fact, are your only ones.”

“Pshaw !” cried Germain. “We do not need any relatives, my dear aunt. We three are quite



enough. And, as we are happy, we have all that is essential."

"You are right, my boy, and I do not complain. And yet," continued Mademoiselle Lénette with a melancholy glance at the old barometer hung between the windows, "I cannot avoid a certain feeling of sadness when I look back fifty years, and remember how large our family was, and see what sad work Time has made with it. If my father, Jean Thoiré, should return to this world, he would be disposed to grumble sorely at seeing his house without children, for he always declared that his three daughters and his son should populate the Rue du Bourg. I remember that the very last time we were all together was the occasion of your baptism, Germain. My brother Thoiré, the father of this Rosine who now writes to me, came expressly from Paris for the occasion, and brought his little girl with him. My sister Loulette was here too, and the whole family, in fact, were assembled. 'My daughter,' said my father, 'I wish before the ceremony to see you all, my children and my grandchildren, assembled in the same apartment;' and so we all went up to the green-room, where your mother Mimi, who was just recovering from her confinement, lay in bed. And you lay in your cradle at her side. When we were all assembled around your mother, my father said, 'Let us count them;' and he found that we were seven, including little Rosine,



Hyacinthe, and the new baby. We all stood in the order of our age, my father first, then my brother Edmond, who was the eldest, then Loulette, followed by myself, then Mimi in her big bed, and the children around the cradle.

“‘Ah! my dear children,’ exclaimed my father, ‘I am happy to see you all once more in my house. Come and kiss me!’

“Then he kissed my brother Edmond, the one we called Thoiré for short, because he was the elder; Edmond kissed Loulette, and in this way the family kiss made the rounds until it reached little Rosine, who gave it last to you, Germain, standing on tiptoe to put her head into your cradle, which was high up; and since that time we have never been all together,” added Aunt Lénette, using her handkerchief violently to conceal her emotion.

Hyacinthe in his turn dashed away a tear from the corner of his eye, and Germain approached his aunt and kissed her with some solemnity.

“You see the reason,” continued Mademoiselle Lénette, replacing her handkerchief in her pocket, in the depths of which rattled her keys, “that you must not be too hard toward this cousin, who is a Thoiré, after all. Nevertheless, my children, you are, of course, the masters of your own house, and whatever you do will be right.”

“I agree with you, aunt, and I will write to



them to-morrow," said Hyacinthe with a sigh, "and tell them that they may come."

"That is settled, then," added Germain, "and I, of course, must look them up a dwelling-place. And now let us have supper, for I am famished."

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## CHAPTER II.

FIFTEEN days later Hyacinthe, having received a letter from Madame de Coulaines, buttoned himself into his nut-colored overcoat, and repaired to the station to meet his cousins, who were to come by the five-o'clock train. April had arrived, but, as often happens in this good province of Barrois, the new month opened atrociously. A northwest wind drove many black clouds over the sky; these clouds broke in occasional down-pours of rain; the gutters on the roofs, filled by the constant showers, poured their contents upon the flag-stones below, and over the gardens on the Quai des Gravières, where the fruit-trees covered with blossoms seemed to shiver in their white spring toilet.

Hyacinthe, as he stood chilled through and through near the gate which separated him from the railway-track, had infinite difficulty in protecting his nut-colored overcoat under a huge umbrella of brown alpaca. A sharp whistle was heard from the bottom of the valley, and a few



moments later the puffing engine drew up in front of the little station.

A dozen or more peasants descended first from the third-class cars ; then came two young and elegant-looking women from a first-class compartment. Lafrogne, who had never in his life traveled in that way, looked with absolute stupefaction at these two elegant women in their faultless black toilets, and could not believe that they were the poor relations he was expecting. He looked around, but could see no other travelers nearer his preconceived ideas, although everybody had left the cars, and the doors were already closed and locked. The two ladies, raising their skirts, were reluctant to leave the porch of the station, and their anxious eyes seemed to be looking for some one on the sidewalk where the rain pattered down.

Hyacinthe summoned all his courage, approached, and, shaking his dripping umbrella, addressed the elder of the ladies, asking timidly if it was not Madame de Coulaines to whom he had the honor of speaking. Then, coloring deeply, he added, "I am Hyacinthe Lafrogne."

"Oh, my dear cousin !" cried the lady, with eager volubility, "how glad I am to see you ! But was there ever such weather ! We are drenched already."

She kissed him without ceremony, and presented her daughter Laurence, who, half blinded by the rain which dashed in her face, extended her



hand while her large, black eyes examined the droll face of this singular cousin.

“What weather!” repeated Madame de Cou-  
laines. “Laurence, we must see about our lug-  
gage.”

They entered the luggage-room; the ladies selected at least a wagon-load, while Hyacinthe looked in astonishment at the pile of trunks and bags.

“Have you a carriage?” asked Madame de Coulaines.

“A carriage! No, but I brought our boy, Césarin, who can take a portion of your trunks on his barrow. As to ourselves, my dear cousin, we can easily go on foot.”

“On foot in this pouring rain?” cried the lady, looking first at the sky and then at the pavement.

“Oh! it is only a shower,” stammered Hyacinthe, humbly, “and we do not live very far from the station.”

He gave his orders to Césarin; then, opening his large umbrella, offered his arm to Madame de Coulaines, and they set out. Laurence, under the insufficient shelter of her parasol, followed them, skipping from stone to stone, and occasionally looking down in a melancholy fashion at her high-heeled shoes, *à la Molière*. They thus went through the Rue Entre-Deux-Ponts, where the shopkeepers from behind their windows stealth-



ily examined the Parisians escorted by one of the Barbels.

“Here we are !” exclaimed Hyacinthe, knocking at his own door.

Catherine ran at the first touch of the knocker. Lafrogne ushered his relatives into the small vestibule, who shook their wet garments without any ceremony over the red and white tiles, scrupulously swept and scrubbed each day by the old servant. Erect in her woolen dress, and wearing her white fluted cap, Mademoiselle Lénette hurried forward to welcome her nieces, and received them on the threshold of the dining-room. Her piercing gray eyes surveyed the Parisians, but no change in her cold, prudent face revealed her impressions. She gravely embraced the mother and daughter, and bore without wincing their enthusiastic greeting. Then, as Césarín had by this time arrived with a detachment of the trunks, she insisted on showing the travelers to their rooms, that they might change their damp garments.

The apartment dedicated to the use of Madame Coulaines and her daughter was situated on the first floor, opposite the rooms where Mademoiselle Lénette and Germain slept. It consisted of one very large room, known from time immemorial as the green chamber, and an adjoining cabinet, where Aunt Lénette had been in the habit of locking up her dresses and sweetmeats.

“This is your room, Rosine,” said Mademoi-



selle Lénette, opening the large double door. —“And this one is for you, my child,” she added, as she showed Laurence the glass door of the cabinet. “You will remain with us until you can install yourselves in the lodgings which Germain has taken for you. Now make yourselves comfortable, and, if you require anything, call Catherine.”

Césarín had just deposited the last of the heavy trunks on the floor, and left the room with Aunt Lénette.

“Thunder !” he exclaimed as he passed Catherine. “Your Parisians have brought trumpery enough with them, and given me no end of bother !”

“Don’t talk to me ; they are just full of airs !” grumbled the old servant, who was wiping the water and mud from her beloved tiles in the vestibule.

For some time Madame de Coulaines and her daughter, uncomfortable and homesick as birds who have been put into new cages, sat chilled and motionless in “the green chamber.” Without a carpet and without a fire, cheerless and cold—with a cracked mirror and scanty curtains of faded damask—the room was absolutely depressing. Laurence, seated on a trunk, looked with despondent eyes on the small round mats, laid at intervals between the door of entrance and the cabinet, as if to indicate to the guests that their feet



must tread there and not upon the waxed floor, which shone like a mirror. She took an inventory with a pitying air of the straw chairs and vases of artificial flowers—the toilet-table in the form of an antique tripod, the heavy table with a marble slab, on which stood a *carafe* of cut glass, and a sugar-bowl to match.

All this hospitable display on the part of the Lafrognes had elicited from Germain the evening before, when he was summoned to behold the results of his aunt's labors, an exclamation of admiration.

"Upon my word," he cried, "you have done wonders ! Our cousins will be lodged like princesses."

The disdain on their faces was certainly most royal ; but, if they resembled princesses, it was princesses exiled from their kingdom, and bitterly regretting their comfortable little home in the Rue du Bac.

"Good Heavens !" cried Laurence, shrugging her shoulders, "this room feels like a tomb. Do you suppose our cousins ever have any fires ?"

"You do not understand," said her mother ; "our cousins are immensely rich ; but these are the parsimonious habits of the country."

"That may be," the young girl replied ; "but I am literally frozen, and I shall never have courage to dress !"

Finally, they threw off the benumbing influ-



ence of cold and fatigue which nailed them to their places. A respect for *les convenances*, added to no small amount of characteristic coquetry, induced them to open their boxes and make a careful toilet.

Laurence, who had just taken off her mourning, replaced her traveling-dress with a costume of two shades of velvet, with sleeves and skirt of silk of the same color. Madame de Coulaines put on an elegant robe of black *faille*. All this took some time ; and when the two travelers descended it was seven o'clock. Supper was on the table ; Mademoiselle Lénette was growing impatient, while Germain, who had returned half-famished from a long day's shooting, was anathematizing all dilatory people. At the sight of his cousins arrayed, as it were, for a *fête*, the two Barbels exchanged with their aunt a startled glance. Germain came forward and greeted his guests politely, while Mademoiselle Lénette exclaimed :

"Why did you take the trouble, my dear niece, to make a toilet? No ceremony is necessary with us, I assure you !"

"And I had no such intention—we have only dressed as we do every day."

Dressed as they did every day ! The two brothers felt that their senses were deserting them. All that finery was in ordinary use, and they traveled first class. "It's no wonder," they said to themselves, "that they are at the end of their resources !"



As to Mademoiselle Lénette, she was absolutely shocked at seeing her niece, widowed only a year previously, wearing silk, which would appear particularly scandalous in the eyes of the Villotte people, where widows wore stuff-garments for at least two years. This first evening settled the Parisians in the estimation of the old lady, who henceforward regarded them as frivolous and dangerous creatures, and mademoiselle rarely changed her first impressions.

They took their seats at the table, which had been somewhat enriched by several additional dishes in honor of the new arrival. Radishes and butter were in white porcelain dishes ; a fillet of veal was garnished with mushrooms, and these, with a roast leg of mutton, a chicory-salad, and a rice-cake, seemed to the brothers the triumph of gastronomical luxury ; while Madame de Coullaines and her daughter, imbued with the Parisian idea that in the country one has everything for nothing, looked upon the fare as so simple that it amounted to absolute niggardliness. At dessert a strong cheese, some sweetmeats, a plate of dried pears and cherries, completely undeceived these ladies in regard to the good living of their cousins at Villotte.

The cloth was just removed, when the knocker on the street-door was heard, and Catherine announced Monsieur Nivard, Hyacinthe's friend.

"Oh, you have company !" cried the visitor,



before he had fairly crossed the sill of the dining-room. "Excuse me, I will not disturb you. I will go away."

"By no means!" replied Hyacinthe, cordially; "these are our cousins from Paris—Madame de Coulaines and her daughter."

Monsieur Nivard knew this perfectly well, notwithstanding his exclamation of astonishment, and his intense curiosity that had impelled him that evening to lift the knocker on the Lafrognes' door so that he might be the first to behold the famous cousins.

He glided along toward the fire, bowing and murmuring excuses and apologies; then took a seat directly opposite the strangers, who examined, with ill-concealed misgivings, this singular specimen of the indigenous growth of Villotte.

Stephen Nivard, an old bachelor of forty-eight, and chief of bureau at the prefecture, afforded a most original subject for analysis. He was prematurely old and broken down; he had not an eyebrow left, nor an eyelash, and not a vestige of beard. Upon his round face, as white and smooth as an egg, there were but three distinct details: a brown wig, which made a hard line across his forehead and temples; a pimpled nose, denoting a persistent disorder of the blood; and two small, greenish eyes, darting malicious, inquisitive glances from under their half-closed lids.

At the sight of this wan and devastated coun-



tenance, one asked one's self what virulent passion had thus swept, like a destroying pestilence, across it, and shown so little respect for this provincial bureaucrat.

Nivard was regarded in Villotte as a very ill-natured person, who had a store of scandalous histories on hand, and whose tongue, in short, was very much to be dreaded. His conversation was personal and gossiping, and his jests as venomous as if his vitiated blood had communicated a tinge of its own disorder even to his mind.

As soon as he was installed before a glass of the wine he liked so much, he began to talk, addressing himself ostensibly to Madame de Coulines, whom he interrogated as to the improvements in Paris.

That lady, always loquacious, was by no means unwilling on this occasion to dazzle her aunt and her cousins by an account of the pleasures of the capital, and of her own distinguished position there. With the heedlessness of a linnet she touched upon the most risky subjects—the actresses of the day, the last new play, a recent Parisian scandal—and one thing after another shocked Mademoiselle Lénette more than they astonished her. The pious old maid shook her head, and regarded this chatter as singularly out of place. Hyacinthe colored at each light word. As to Nivard, all the time he was talking to Madame de Coulines he never took his eyes from



Mademoiselle Laurence, who sat with her elbow on the table, listening to the conversation with a most disdainful air.

The small, keen eyes of the chief of bureau seemed to dwell with pleasure upon this pretty creature, whose fair complexion, expressive features, and classically-moulded profile, were brought out in the soft light of the lamp. This scrutiny of Nivard's was so prolonged and undisguised that finally Germain became annoyed, and, emerging from his corner, he in his turn examined his cousin with unwilling and distrustful admiration.

The uncivilized huntsman was scandalized and dismayed by the elegance of his dainty relative. His curious eyes studied timidly but eagerly each detail in the toilet of the young girl—a toilet which seemed to him extravagant and luxurious to the very last degree : the small, bronze slippers, cut so low that they allowed a delicate blue stocking, embroidered with black, to be seen ; the rounded bust, where a cluster of violets, purchased at the station in Paris, were shedding their last, faint sweetness ; the slender throat, surrounded by a broad white collar ; the black hair, exquisitely dressed, lightly crimped over the brow, and falling in soft curls at the back, and fastened by a scarlet ribbon—all these trifles told of a certain cultivation and worldliness which both puzzled and disturbed Germain.

The deep-throated voice of the bell on the



clock-tower, sounding the *couvre-feu*, interrupted this perilous contemplation, and put an end to Madame de Coulaines's babble. The habits of the house were inflexible—everybody went to bed there and rose again by the belfry-clock. Nivard, who was entirely *au courant* with the rules of the mansion, took leave of the company. The two brothers went to look at the shop doors and windows. Mademoiselle Lénette, having conducted her guests herself to their apartment, and lighted their candle, embraced them gravely, and bade them good-night.

The next day Laurence de Coulaines, awakened by the shrill cries of the milkmen in the Rue du Bourg, had a moment of keen regret and amazement at not finding herself in her little room in the Rue du Bac. She did not at first know where she was. The coarse sheets, whose flax was sown and spun by Mademoiselle Lénette, recalled her to the reality. She rubbed her eyes, looked around her, and uttered a profound sigh at the sight of her small cabinet dimly lighted by the dawn. The walls, covered with a gray paper, were ornamented their entire length by hooks, on which hung empty bags and portmanteaux, and by shelves where stood Aunt Lénette's pots of sweetmeats and jars of dried fruits. In this unfurnished room the small iron bedstead, the pine-wood table serving for the toilet, and two straw chairs, formed so dreary, poor, and comfortless an interior, that



Laurence was ready to weep. With little temptation to linger in so sad a spot, the girl jumped from her bed, thrust her feet into her slippers, and ran to the window.

As soon as she drew aside the curtains she was reassured by the scene which met her eyes. A soft, spring sunshine filled the street, touching with rosy fingers the carvings on the gray façade, causing the pavement, which was still wet after the recent rain, to shine with a silvery lustre. Market-gardeners were bringing their early vegetables into the town, and crying them with sing-song voices: "Parsnips, carrots, and cabbages! —parsnips, carrots, and cabbages!" Above her head the swallows flew gayly to and fro with their quick, sharp cries, grazing the cornice of the roof with their black wings. At the two ends of the street were hills covered with vineyards, their brown sides standing out against the blue sky.

Hope, when one is but eighteen, rarely folds her wings, and now awoke to active life again in Mademoiselle de Coulaines's heart cheered by this bright spring morning, and by the silvery sound of the church-bells ringing for early mass. She left the windows open, and, moving cautiously to avoid awakening her mother, who loved her morning nap, began her toilet gayly enough. But, when she had poured into her wash-hand basin the contents of her pitcher and *carafe*, she discovered that she had exhausted the water. Ac-



customed to inundate herself at her morning ablutions, Laurence shrugged her shoulders in discomfiture on seeing herself thus limited. "What!" she murmured, "do they economize in water, too?—So much the worse for them!" she thought, and determined at once to set out in quest of another pitcherful from the kitchen. She enveloped herself in a *peignoir*, gave a twist to the ripples of her abundant hair, which fell below her slender waist, and fastened the heavy knot to the top of her head. Then she carefully opened the door, slipped out into the corridor, and suddenly started back with an exclamation of dismay. Retreating into her chamber, she closed the door.

Germain was in the corridor; he had started to go to the Bois de Rembercourt with his dogs, and had just emerged from his room, buttoned up in his hunting-coat and wearing long leather gaiters. In the dark shadow of the corridor he caught a glimpse of his young cousin holding a water-pitcher in one hand, and with the other drawing the folds of her *peignoir* more closely over her bosom. The picture was but momentary. He had no sooner seen the fair face, illuminated by a pair of superb black eyes and surrounded by a mass of disheveled hair, than the vision vanished behind the door, which was abruptly closed.

Lafrogne blushed to the roots of his hair, and, very much embarrassed, felt a momentary longing to retreat; then the sense of the duties of



hospitality, and perhaps some evil spirit, impelled him to linger. He hesitated, and then, with no little awkwardness, went to the door of the cabinet.

"Cousin," he said, in a voice that could hardly be heard.

Profound silence on the other side of the door.

"Cousin," he repeated, timidly rattling at the latch, "do you want anything?"

The door opened a little way, and a pretty face beautified by a radiant smile showed itself in the aperture.

"I beg your pardon, Cousin Germain, but I wanted some water. Would you kindly tell the servant to bring some?"

"I will go myself and get you some at the pump," stammered Germain, somewhat disturbed; and he walked away with a rapid step. Five minutes elapsed, and the vigorous huntsman reappeared, bearing an enormous jug dripping with fresh water.

Again he rattled the latch.

"Here is a big jug of water, cousin."

"Thanks; please put it down by the door."

He obeyed and went away; but, when he reached the first step on the staircase, he stopped and turned around, looking back curiously.

The door opened half-way; a white arm appeared—a pretty dimpled arm with a mole near the elbow, which lifted the jug while a laugh-



ing voice repeated, "Thank you, cousin—thank you."

This was all ; but during the remainder of the day, under the drooping branches of the great beeches of Rembercourt, Germain fell into more than one long reverie. Through the rustling leaves he saw once more the bewitching spectacle of that fair face and rippling hair—of those smiling eyes—of that white arm, with the small brown mole above the elbow.

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### CHAPTER III.

A FEW days later and the furniture of the Coulaines arrived. The ladies hastened to install themselves in the apartments engaged for them in the Rue des Saules. The arrangement of their new home absorbed their time and attention for more than a week, and gave infinite displeasure to Mademoiselle Lénette. The *salon*, crowded with all the stray relics of the former luxurious surroundings of the widow, especially scandalized the old lady, who could not understand how people who needed the substantials of life could have so much superfluous trash about them. The trifles scattered on the *étagères*, the faded blue rep of the sofas and chairs, the carpet spread upon the waxed floor, the *jardinières* filled with natural flowers, disturbed the first principles of domestic



economy. There was a certain small lustre of modern make with rattling pendants, from the centre of which hung a crystal bell, against which Mademoiselle Lénette constantly knocked her head. This bell was peculiarly obnoxious to the nerves of the good lady, and aroused many sharp criticisms upon the two Parisians.

In the beginning, Mademoiselle Lénette conceived it to be her duty to give practical advice and hints to her relatives, and even to utter a few words of gentle condemnation of their way of living. She intimated that, if they went to market themselves in the morning, instead of rising between ten and eleven, they would find it much better in every way, on the score of both health and economy.

She even permitted herself to criticise the long hours employed in practising upon the piano, in reading fashion-magazines and the journals, or in embroidering useless bands of worsted-work ; she wished to initiate them into the mystery of the semi-annual washes after the fashion in the provinces; and was quite willing to give them receipts for the manufacture of sweetmeats. But her advice had been received coldly, and even sometimes with a gesture of impatience, and, as Aunt Lénette was not of an especially submissive temper, she determined, therefore, to abstain from showing her nieces an interest to which so little importance was attached.



“It is nothing to us, after all,” she said one evening to Hyacinthe. “One gets small thanks for good advice, and I have no fancy for meddling with the affairs of my neighbors. But things I see and hear at your cousins’ make my blood boil ; the girl is badly brought up, the mother has no sense, and their establishment is managed in a most reckless, foolish manner.”

By degrees the intercourse between the two families became more and more infrequent ; they saw each other, in fact, only in ceremonious visits. The departure of Mademoiselle Lénette for her farm at Rembercourt caused the final breaking of ties which had never been very strong ; and, before the end of her first year in Villotte, Madame de Coulaines was completely awakened from the delusions in which she had indulged in regard to the kindly intentions of her wealthy country relatives, and bitterly regretted the unfortunate idea which had entered her head of burying herself in this little hole of a town.

The mother and daughter were equally unhappy in this dismal spot, where there were no amusements, and where they had no congenial intercourse. The days seemed endless, and in spite of themselves they were forced to adopt the customs of Villotte, and retire at the nine-o’clock bell.

Sometimes Madame de Coulaines, looking at her daughter’s pretty face, would sigh and say to



herself, "If I could but marry Laurence, how quickly I would return to Paris!" And Laurence, touching her piano with languid white hands, thought in her turn that marriage alone could release her from the monotonous groove of her daily life in which she vegetated. There were occasional moments when she felt quite ready to throw herself at the head of the first man who would appear, provided he had money and the air of a gentleman.

The worst of the whole was, that Mademoiselle Lénette's predictions were realized; and that the two women, totally incapable of regulating their expenses, found it impossible to make both ends meet. They had already incurred many debts with tradesmen, and stern necessity impelled Madame de Coulaines to accept a suggestion which she had rejected with disdain when offered by her aunt. She resigned herself to asking Delphin Nivard's aid to obtain them some copying from the tax-office. Nivard did not wait to be asked twice, but exerted himself at once to serve the widow, showing most exceptional eagerness and zeal.

"Upon my word," said Germain, "have they bewitched the man? What interest can he have in making himself so agreeable to them?"

It was not long before Germain was enlightened upon this point. One day when Hyacinthe and himself were alone in the shop, the chief of bureau walked in and immediately led the con-



versation in the direction of the Coulaïnes ; after dwelling on their precarious position, he intimated that the widow ought to think of marrying her daughter.

"Suppose she did think of it," replied Germain, roughly, "have you a son-in-law to propose to her?"

"Perhaps," answered the bureaucrat, with a smile that wrinkled his whole face.

"Ah, ah!" grumbled Germain, unsympathetically; "who is the young idiot who would marry a girl without a penny?"

"It is no young idiot," replied Nivard, gravely, "but a man well on in years, who is settled in life."

"What is his name?"

"Good Heavens, man! can't you understand? It is I."

"You—Nivard?"

Hyacinthe, in his astonishment, dropped a bottle on his ledger, and Germain uttered a shout of laughter which made the very windows rattle.

"Yes—I—" replied his friend, much annoyed. "What is there so ridiculous in that?"

"Nivard!" exclaimed Germain, "have you seen my cousin?"

"Of course I have."

"Do you know that she is just eighteen—in the first blush of womanhood—that she is as pretty as a flower, and as frisky as a young colt?"



"Very well—what then?"

"What then! Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror?"

He grasped him suddenly by the arm and whisked him in front of a glass, where Nivard, much startled, suddenly saw reflected his wig, and eyelids without lashes, his pallid face and inflamed nose.

"Examine yourself well," continued Germain, brutally, "and ask yourself if you are the sort of person for whom a girl like Laurence could ever care. Why, my dear fellow, the mere thought ought to make every hair in your wig stand up straight."

"Pshaw! Germain," stammered Nivard, biting his thin lips and endeavoring to disengage himself from the muscular grasp of Lafrogne the younger, "you need not get so much excited. I see that I need not rely on your aid, and that you refuse to help me."

"I not only refuse to help you, but I intend to hinder you as much as lies in my power—be sure of that. I will never lift a finger to promote such a senseless project!"

The conversation threatened to become so angry that Hyacinthe thought it advisable to interfere. He therefore quietly remarked to his brother that Madame de Coulaines alone had the right to decide the question asked by Delphin Nivard, and that she would have reason to reproach



her relatives if they did not submit the proposal to her ; he finally succeeded in calming the chief of bureau by promising to call that very evening on his cousins, and bring their reply to him.

The honest Hyacinthe executed his commission conscientiously, but, at the first sound of Nivard's name, Madame Coulaines uttered a little shriek of dismay.

"Is he laughing at me?" she exclaimed, "and does he think that I would give my daughter to such a grotesque-looking buffoon?"

As to Laurence, she laughed heartily, and replied with no little disdain that she felt no inspiration to enact the *rôle* of a sick-nurse.

Delphin Nivard was keenly hurt by this refusal, which he had not anticipated. He took it into his head that Germain had caused his discomfiture, and his wounded self-love filled his heart with anger, and inspired him with a vivid longing for revenge. He allowed nothing of this to be seen, however, believing with Monsieur de Talleyrand that vengeance is a dish that can be eaten cold ; but he swore to himself that he would snatch at the first occasion to repay the Lafrognes for the bitterness of his humiliation.

As to Mademoiselle Lénette, when she heard of Nivard's matrimonial aspirations, she shrugged her shoulders. "He is mad," she said—"quite mad—to think of marrying, with his face and figure ! But men never think of such things,



and Laurence did well to put him down at once with his senseless cackle. I am glad to see that the little girl has sense enough not to give herself to the first infatuated fool who asks to marry her ; and one of these days, when our grapes are all gathered, I will look about for some honest fellow who would be willing to marry her."

Unfortunately, Aunt Lénette was fated never to see her vines blossom again. Toward Midlent she caught cold during a long service at church, and was obliged to take to her bed ; she was seventy-four years old, and at that age inflammation of the lungs is no trifling affair. Two days later she was dying, and the *curé* of Notre-Dame was hastily sent for to administer the last sacraments.

When she was alone again with her nephews after the departure of the priest, "My children," she said, "it is all over ; I am going to leave you."

The two Barbels were overwhelmed ; accustomed to seeing their aunt alert, erect, and robust, the possibility that their household could be broken up had never occurred to them, and it was almost impossible for them now to grasp the appalling fact.

"It cannot be," murmured Hyacinthe, with a sob ; "God will never be so cruel as to take you away from us ! He will let you remain ; what would become of us without you ?"

"It is hard to depart when we are so happy—we three together," said his aunt. "You have



been unaccustomed to living alone or taking care of yourselves, my poor boys!—Hyacinthe, you will find the keys of the wardrobes in my desk—all the linen is arranged in dozens. Who will now take care of all that? and what a pity it is that I cannot live until the next wash!—Germain, my son, do not forget that our vines are well trimmed early in April. Alas! I say ‘our vines,’ as if I were not going to quit all earthly things.”

The stifled sobs of the two brothers at these words burst all bounds.

“Calm yourselves,” continued Mademoiselle Lénette, more feebly. “Let me look at you once more, and then kiss me.”

They both kissed her. The effort she had made in talking exhausted her, and she gasped for breath. At the end of another half-hour of silence, she lifted her head and asked if her nieces had been summoned.

“Yes, my dear aunt,” Germain replied, “and they were here three times yesterday; but I would not let them come up, for fear of fatiguing you.”

“Send for them,” whispered Aunt Lénette, faintly; “they are your only relatives—be good to them. I wish to say good-by to them.”

Her voice died away. Hyacinthe sent for Madame de Coulaines and her daughter, but before they reached the house the angel of death, whose silent flight is more rapid than human steps, had entered the Maison Lafrogne and touched the lips



and eyes of Aunt Lénette with his soft, feathery wings. When the two nieces ascended the stairs, Mademoiselle Lénette had ceased to live. The sight was most melancholy : Catherine had just closed the dead woman's eyes, and had lighted two candles at the head of the bed ; Hyacinthe was buried in an arm-chair ; Germain, with his lips compressed, was wandering like a soul in torment up and down the ancient room where Mademoiselle Lénette had passed so large a portion of her life.

The dress she had laid aside two days before still hung over a chair, preserving in its folds something of the personality of the woman who was no more. Her spectacle-case and the old prayer-book, bound in brown, were still on the chimney-piece, where she had laid them on her return from church ; but Aunt Lénette would never again turn those time-yellowed leaves, she would never again button her erect form in that woolen dress she had so often worn. All that happy daily life was over forever. While Madame de Coulaines and Laurence, kneeling at the side of the bed, murmured prayers for her who was gone and whom they had never loved, Hyacinthe mourned aloud :

“She is gone ! We shall see her no more ! If she could have had a long sickness—but no ; she is dead in two days—struck down all at once ! Ah ! it is too hard !”

At twilight the bells of Notre-Dame rang out



for the dead. All night the two Barbels watched by the side of the body ; and the next day at noon Aunt Lénette was laid at rest between her sister and her father in the cemetery of Sainte-Marguerite, in the shade of green trees and tall, waving grass, in a sheltered spot, which commanded a view of the vineyard on the hill-side, now greening in the warm spring sunshine, and of the clustering houses in Villotte.

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#### CHAPTER IV.

FOR the first month after the death of Made-moiselle Lénette, the two brothers seemed too stunned to realize the heaviness of the loss they had suffered. They lived in a mechanical sort of way, without paying any heed to what was going on within the house or without. They abandoned all housekeeping cares to Catherine, refused to see any visitors, took their seats at the table without any appetite, and in fact cared little for anything. Hyacinthe wandered here and there, like a body that has lost its soul. Germain had lost all his love for the chase, and never put his foot in the woods. Sometimes, at early dawn, the two brothers stole cautiously out of the house, quite unseen by each other, and reached the cemetery by unfrequented routes, where they were astonished to meet by the side of their aunt's grave. They



lingered there for hours, exchanging scarcely three words, busy in setting out flowers and vines. April showers had opened the soil, and they had only to set out the plants the old lady was most fond of. An attack of paralysis, depriving them suddenly of the use of their eyes and their limbs, could not have made them more helpless than the sudden death of Mademoiselle Lénette.

Habituated to entire reliance on their aunt in all household matters, they knew nothing of the management and details of housekeeping ; and the smallest domestic trifles assumed to them the importance of an affair of state.

Who was to order their dinners and replenish their wardrobes ? At the very thought, they looked at each other in consternation, and finally yielded everything to Catherine.

They puzzled their brains over the bunch of keys which Mademoiselle Lénette wielded with such dexterity. Within those deep wardrobes, where their aunt had arranged the linen in a methodical order of which she had carried away the secret, the two poor men failed to find the article of which they were in search. They spent hours in looking for a pocket-handkerchief ; then, wearied out after having disordered every shelf, they seated themselves in utter discouragement opposite the piles of tumbled linen, and murmured, in heart-breaking tones, " Ah, if aunt were only here ! "



One evening in May, after a day wasted in this fashion, the supper was more detestable than usual. Catherine had given her masters two dishes which they particularly disliked—a tongue *braisée* and some *œufs à l'oseille*. As the crowning touch, the salad, too, was badly dressed and absolutely uneatable. The two brothers, seated before their untouched plates, were silent, fatigued, and out of temper, when Germain, laying down his fork with noisy abruptness, murmured these words, which seemed to be the conclusion of a long soliloquy: “No, no! this state of things must come to an end!”

“What is it that must come to an end?” asked Hyacinthe, aroused in his turn from profound meditation by his brother’s exclamation.

“What! Why, the life we lead, of course. We are young, in good health, and well-to-do, and yet we live in more wretched discomfort than the poorest silk-weaver in the Rue de Véel.”

“That is true; but we are the victims of circumstances, and we can do no otherwise. Ah! if poor Aunt Lénette were only here!”

“Yes, if she were here, it would be all right; but, since the dear woman is gone, we cannot spend the rest of our days in lamenting her, while the house is all at loose ends. We are no longer children, Lafrogne, and we must take some decided step in this emergency.”

“What step, Germain?”



“Well, then, look here,” answered the younger brother, folding his napkin leisurely. “I know that you will be horrified at what I am going to say, and I am well aware that my proposition has a very weak side to it ; but, of two evils, it is advisable to choose the least. Catherine is growing old ; it is impossible for her to do everything, and—in short, we ought to have a woman at the head of the house.”

“Hum !” replied Hyacinthe, dipping a crust into his wine—the pure juice of the grape. “It is a great risk to run. If we should take a house-keeper, ten to one she would rob us ; and if she were honest, she would tyrannize over us. That would be jumping from the frying-pan into the fire !”

“Who was speaking of mercenary services ?” said Germain—“not I ! No ; we require a woman to watch over our affairs with a devotion that one does not find in a domestic ; and, consequently, it is perfectly clear that one of us must marry.”

“Oh ! oh ! oh !” cried Hyacinthe, in three different tones. “What are you thinking of ? At our ages, with our habits, would you introduce a stranger under our roof, whose customs and tastes are foreign to our own, who will not like our way of living, and who, ten to one, will take a dislike to whichever of us is her brother-in-law ? It is a most hazardous experiment.”

“It is one, nevertheless, which must be made,”



answered Germain, obstinately. "And if our poor aunt could speak, I feel certain that she would offer the same advice."

"Yes, if we could only find a second Aunt Lénette," murmured Hyacinthe, thoughtfully.

"A little younger, I think," objected Germain.

"The choice is not an easy one," resumed the elder Barbel. "Where on earth are we to look for a woman who will interest herself in our affairs, and be willing to accommodate herself to our ways?"

"Who knows? We certainly have not very far to go, for it seems to me that we have her under our hand."

"Whom can you mean?"

"Our cousin De Coulaines."

"The mother or the daughter?" asked Hyacinthe, ingenuously.

"The mother is perhaps a little too mature," answered Germain, with a light grimace. "No; I am thinking of the daughter, of course."

"Laurence!" exclaimed Hyacinthe, with uplifted hands. "She cannot be more than nineteen!"

"So much the better! She has had no time to fall into any fixed habits, and we can mould her to our taste."

"But the difference of age! Do you not remember what you said to Nivard?"

"Nivard is used up and worn out! We are



young and hearty in comparison. And remember that, if we decide to marry, it is the height of prudence to take a wife from among our relatives—then, you see, our fortune will not go out of the family ; and, besides, Laurence is poor, and she will thus be bound to us by double ties—those of blood and gratitude. In selecting a stranger we should expose ourselves to the same risks, without any corresponding advantages.”

Germain preached so well that he ended by convincing Hyacinthe. The brothers agreed that Mademoiselle de Coulaines was altogether the best person.

“She is certainly too young, though,” persisted Hyacinthe, sipping his wine. “But, never mind ! Here’s to her health !”

“That is settled, then,” exclaimed Germain, shaking his brother’s hand heartily. “Now, the only point that remains undecided is which of us shall marry her.”

“That is absurd !” answered Hyacinthe. “You are the one, of course. You are the younger ; and, between ourselves, I have more than once fancied that you were by no means indifferent to the young person in question.”

“Pshaw !” answered the other. “I liked to look at her ; but she would please me quite as much as a sister-in-law as a wife. Besides, you are the eldest, and it is you who should be the head of the family.”



"Thanks for the honor," replied Hyacinthe, rising to his feet in his eagerness. "I yield all my rights of seniority. I am timid, awkward, and middle-aged. I should be but a sorry object in the eyes of a pretty woman!"

"Nonsense! You are kind and gentle, agreeable and accommodating—all of which qualities are essential in matrimony; while I, on the contrary, am rough and unamiable, and with my boorish manners—those of a huntsman—I am like an untrained cub. No, no! You are the one who will go before the mayor."

"But, Germain," protested the unhappy Hyacinthe, in an entreating tone, "I do not like women. I am really afraid of them!"

"And with me it is just the reverse. They are afraid of me!"

"Come, now, my boy, be serious. Only just now you insisted that our house and home were going to rack and ruin—that one of us must marry. I agreed with you—supposing, of course, that you would be the one to take the step."

"I? I had, on the contrary, the idea that yours was the duty—"

"Not so. I am too old!"

"And I too ill-tempered."

The brothers sat for a time in silence, with their eyes cast down, buried in perplexed thought. Then looking up, and catching each other's eyes, they laughed in a certain melancholy way.



"Nevertheless, we must come to a decision," resumed Hyacinthe.

"Very well ! we can draw lots," replied his brother, "for in this way we may go on forever !"

He took his memorandum-book and tore out two leaves, upon one of which he wrote Hyacinthe's name, and on the other his own, and then, folding them precisely alike, he threw them both into his hat.

"Choose !" he cried. "The first name opened will be the man."

"One moment," said Hyacinthe, who, in evident terror, watched his brother's preparations ; "let us do this more formally, and then the one on whom falls the lot cannot accuse the other of any trickery."

He called Catherine from the window, and, when she appeared, he said :

"My good girl, you see this hat. Very well ; within it are two notes : shut your eyes, and take out one."

Catherine looked first at one of the Barbels and then at the other, and asked herself if the brothers had not gone mad. Finally, in obedience to an imperative gesture from Germain, she turned up her sleeves, and plunged her hand into the hat.

Hyacinthe, with his eyes riveted on Catherine, followed her movements with an ardent hope that



it would not be his name that would appear. A cold shiver passed up and down his spine.

"Here is the paper, sir," said the cook, taking one of the papers from the hat, and holding it toward the two brothers.

"Give it to my brother Hyacinthe," cried Germain, eagerly, "and be off with you !"

He good-naturedly pushed her out of the room, and, before she had time to know where she was, he had shut the door in her face. Hyacinthe in the mean time unfolded the paper with trembling fingers. The eldest Lafrogne went to the window to see better, and his long, simple profile was thrown in relief against the white curtains.

"Well?" said the other, impatiently.

"It is '*Germain*,'" answered Hyacinthe, with a sigh of relief. He handed the paper to his brother, who read it, and crumpled it in his hand.

"I might have known it," he grumbled.

"Come," said Hyacinthe, in a coaxing, affectionate tone, "take courage, my dear fellow. Providence does all things well. And now it is for me to go to sound our cousin De Coulaines."

"There is no immediate hurry," replied Germain, sulkily.

"I do not agree with you ; it is best that we should know this very day what we have to expect. You do not repent already, I trust ?"

"I have given my word," murmured Germain, dreamily.



Hyacinthe took his hat, and went at once to call on Madame de Coulaines.

Laurence had that moment gone to her chamber, and the widow was alone in her dining-room. Hyacinthe explained to her as best he could the varied annoyances they had suffered since the death of Aunt Lénette, and he asked her with much ceremony to give her daughter's hand to his younger brother.

Madame de Coulaines could hardly believe her ears. After the more than chilling manner in which she had been treated by the Lafrognes this astonishing step affected her like a transformation-scene in a fairy spectacle. She prudently concealed her joy, however, and replied loftily that she was much honored by her cousin's proposition ; that marriage was a very serious matter, and that she must consult her daughter before she could give any definite reply. In short, she asked for the night for reflection, and promised to send him a reply in the morning.

As soon as Hyacinthe had gone, she hurried to her daughter's room. She found her seated in a low chair near the open window, reading a novel by the last rays of the setting sun which came through the branches of the trees in the garden opposite. As the door opened she lifted her head and was surprised at her mother's air of excitement.

Madame de Coulaines gayly snatched the book



from her hands, kissed her on her forehead, and, sitting down at her side, said :

“Listen to me, Laurence ; I have some news for you.”

“What is it ?” murmured Laurence ; “you are quite radiant.”

“Some one has just been here, some one who has made a proposal of marriage—a most magnificent offer, I assure you, and most unexpected. Guess !”

“The son of a prince, of course,” said Laurence, jestingly, whose eyes had an incredulous expression.

“Not the son of a prince, but your cousin Germain Lafrogne.”

“Not quite the same thing !” answered the girl, with a disdainful curl of her lip.

“You had best not complain. A man with an income of twenty-five thousand francs, to say nothing of the fortune which will eventually come to him from his brother.”

“A bear,” answered Laurence, “an absolute bear—a savage who is twenty years older than I.”

“You talk like the merest child ! If you had a little more experience you would know that men of that age and of the style of Germain are the easiest to manage, and make the very best husbands. Besides, he is by no means ill-looking. He has fine eyes and superb teeth ; he is well



made, and I am certain that the air of the forest preserves people, for he does not look his age. You must lay aside all sentiment, little girl. You know that we are much embarrassed, and that it is impossible for us to make both ends meet. I had a scene yesterday with the grocer, who actually threatened me with an execution. Be reasonable, my child, and do not refuse the only suitable match which has been offered to you, for later you will be ready to eat your fingers for having done so."

Laurence, with her chin resting on one hand, while the other played a tune on the window-glass, stood without uttering a word.

"Hyacinthe will be here to-morrow," continued the widow ; " what shall I tell him ? "

" I am well aware that I have no right to be fastidious," said the girl, at last, shrugging her shoulders nervously ; " tell him, therefore, that I shall do precisely as you think best."

Her mother left the room. Laurence turned again toward the window, and, with her hands buried in the masses of her dark hair, with her eyes fixed on the trees in the garden, abandoned herself to melancholy thoughts.

The sun had set, but a warm glow flooded the sky on the right. Against this ruddy light, the trees, the sharply-pointed roofs, and the slender steeple of a church-tower, stood out in black relief. Laurence, who instinctively loved bright col-



ors, strong perfumes, and loud music, and who generally took great pleasure in watching the changing lights of the setting sun, this evening sighed at the thought of the contrast between this illumination and the darkness within her soul which had been caused by Germain's singular step.

She had certainly determined more than once to marry, and to marry as soon as possible ; but, although she had no good reason to look forward to a brilliant marriage, she had, at all events, dreamed of a very different husband from her cousin Lafrogne. Germain, under his mature and rough aspect, in no way realized the ideal she had conceived. And yet she accepted the facts which her mother laid before her, and realized that she was entirely right in advising her not to disdain so advantageous an offer, although it was not enticing. It was a great thing to emerge from the narrow and penurious existence in which it was necessary to count every farthing, to wear faded dresses and mended gloves, and to listen in submissive silence to the claims of angry tradespeople imbibited by innumerable unpaid bills.

At all events, when she was Madame Lafrogne, she would be rich, and the mistress of an establishment where nothing was lacking. She could indulge in all the luxury she adored, in all the superfluity which with her was almost a necessity.

At Laurence's age, when the heart has not yet spoken, life is seen only on the surface ;



there is no knowledge of the pain and sorrow, the shame and mortification, hidden underneath. Consequently, resolutions are easily taken, before which, at a later hour, one is amazed that one did not shrink in terror and dismay. This is the explanation of the strange marriages which are made by so many young girls not only with resignation, but almost with a smile upon their lips. They would be odious were it not that they are the result more of ignorance and heedlessness than of calculation and ambition.

When Laurence awoke from her reverie, the light of the setting sun had faded ; the hill, the houses, and the trees, were alike one black cloud, a confused mass ; and in the sky, now a pale-green, like aqua-marine, one solitary star trembled on the verge of the horizon. The young girl shook her head sadly, as if she were bidding a final adieu to the ideal lover of whom she had thought ever since she left her boarding-school. It was all over : she had accepted her fate ; she had decided to call herself Madame Lafrogne.

The next day, at noon, Hyacinthe, having received a note from Madame de Coulaines, assisted Germain to make his *toilette de cérémonie*. The bold huntsman trimmed his flowing locks and his beard ; he wore a stiff silk hat, which gave him the headache ; his coat was too tight, and his patent-leather boots tortured his feet.

“ You see,” he said to Hyacinthe, making fu-



tile efforts to introduce his hands into a pair of kid gloves, "all these ceremonies are not my style."

Hyacinthe encouraged him as best he could when he escorted him to the Rue des Saules, where they found their relatives waiting for them in the *salon*, which was decorated for the occasion with the luxury of fresh flowers. After a few minutes, Madame de Coulaines made a sign to Hyacinthe, and took him into the next room, in order to leave the new suitor to make his own advances to her daughter, without the drawback of spectators.

Laurence, seated on the piano-stool, was nervously twisting a rose in her fingers. Germain, erect in his arm-chair, was more and more conscious of the discomfort of his best coat.

"It is very warm here," he said, suddenly, in a choked voice.

"A storm is coming up," answered Laurence, without lifting her eyes. "Shall I open the window, cousin?"

"By no means," he cried, eagerly. It seemed to him that, if the window were opened, it would be still more difficult for him to find words of explanation. And at last, without the slightest introduction, like a man throwing himself into the water—"Cousin Laurence," he said, "has your mother told you of my wishes?"

She colored, and raised her large, white lids, and fixed her superb black eyes on Germain, who



was completely dazzled by them. "Yes, she has told me," she said, slowly.

"Well, then, answer me frankly, as between honest people. Will you be my wife? I am not much of a talker, and I am not good at long speeches; but I wish to tell you that you will make me very happy by accepting my hand, and I will do my best to prevent you from ever regretting that you have done so. What do you say?" The rose lightly trembled in the girl's hand.

She murmured, in a voice that was almost inaudible, "Yes, Cousin Germain."

He rose and went to her side.

"Thanks," he said, in a full, rich voice, and at the same time, with scanty ceremony, taking possession of the slender fingers still holding the half-faded rose, he placed it triumphantly in his button-hole as he added, "I swear to you, on the word of an honest man, that I will do all in my power to make you happy!"

The bans were published with all possible expedition, and three weeks later the marriage took place at Notre-Dame. As the death of Mademoiselle Lénette was so recent there were no wedding festivities. The whole town, however, in great astonishment at this most unexpected turn of affairs, filled the church to overflowing. Coming out the bride and groom passed through a curious crowd, among whom stood Delphin Nivard.



When the bride, gathering up her long, rustling train of white satin, had stepped lightly into the first carriage, the bureaucrat stood for a good two minutes looking after the horses trotting rapidly in the direction of the Rue du Bourg. A most unpleasant smile curled his thin lips, and as he rubbed his hands he said to himself : " Take care, good man ! Do not balk me of my revenge by breaking the necks of your precious burden. The fair bride will lead the two Barbels a pretty life ! And when she places them on the gridiron, may I be there to stir the fire and see them broil ! "

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## CHAPTER V.

THE newly-married couple passed their honeymoon at the farm at Rembercourt. A short distance from the farm-buildings stood a small house built by Lafrogne the father, which served as a *pied-à-terre* to the family during the fruit-season, where the bride installed herself as best she might. These days were very sweet to Germain, who was by no means *blasé* ; he was thrilled with constant wonder and ever-increasing joy as he realized his happiness in having won so fair a creature. He snatched at all the bliss of matrimony with the eagerness of a poor devil who has lived for a long time on wild fruit gathered along the road-side,



and who is offered for the first time velvety and exquisite peaches.

It was the season of hay-making, and the delicious smell of the new-mown grass, which filled the air in the morning and evening, intoxicated Germain still more. He adored Laurence, and she, who was a thorough woman, profited by this to establish, little by little, her dominion over the heart and mind of her husband.

The first use she made of her power was to fill the old house in the Rue du Bourg with work-people, and entirely alter its interior arrangements. Hyacinthe hazarded a few timid objections; but he, as well as Germain, was conquered by the pretty, coaxing ways of his sister-in-law. The Lafrogne mansion was remodeled, painted and decorated, and new parquet floors were laid during the summer and autumn which followed the marriage. Not a vestige of the old furniture was to be seen, except some Flanders tapestry and some articles in the "green-room." Hyacinthe sighed softly, while Catherine exclaimed aloud at the sacrilege; but the rejuvenation of the house of the two Barbels went on just the same. Each afternoon Laurence drove in from Rembercourt to superintend the progress of the metamorphosis. She came in a low basket-wagon, drawn by two spirited Corsican ponies, which Germain had purchased a few weeks after the marriage, and which she drove herself. When the pony-carriage ap-



peared in the Rue des Clouères, or in the Rue du Bourg, people ran to the window to see young Madame Lafrogne, with her hair lightly waved, and a veil loosely tied around a gray-felt hat, holding the white reins in her many-buttoned buckskin gloves.

"That little woman is coming on bravely," said one. "She makes the Lafrogne gold-pieces fly," said another. "Ah, if Mademoiselle Lénette were only here !"

But Aunt Lénette slept in a spot where ears heard not, where eyes saw not ; and, therefore, with every respect for her memory, the changes and repairs went on all the same.

When the carpenters and painters had finished their work, the question of furnishing arose. *Portières* were hung at all the doors, and carpets laid on every floor ; even the stairs were covered. Madame Lafrogne had unearthed in some half-forgotten shop in the upper town some old furniture covered with antique tapestry, which she placed in the *salon*. From Paris she ordered Dutch lustres, Japanese lamps, and rare *faïences*. The boudoir was hung with poppy-colored satin, to bring out Laurence's fair skin and black hair. Germain had a smoking-room carpeted with India matting and embellished with Oriental divans, but he dared not smoke within it. There was not a corner that was not filled with natural flowers, there was not a square foot on the wall



where the eye was not amused by some priceless trifle—candelabra, of bronze or polished brass, shining in the light, and *faïences* of the most brilliant, striking colors.

The wonders of the house of the two Barbels were the absorbing topic of conversation throughout Villotte. Innumerable were the pretexts invented to penetrate within its walls and inspect the results of Madame Lafrogne's caprices, and significant indeed were the glances exchanged between neighbors. Sarcastic were the smiles, pitiful were the shakes of the head, as comments were made of not the most charitable nature.

"That must have cost a pretty sum of money," said the visitors, after the door closed behind them. "The Barbels have been compelled to loosen their purse-strings! A man is never too old to be foolish," added another, sententiously.

"What would you have?" said Delphin Niward, in a tone of hypocritical compassion, while a malignant joy illuminated his small, green eyes, sparkling under their half-closed lids—those lids so guiltless of lashes.

A chambermaid had been added to old Catherine, and Hyacinthe himself was disturbed in the routine of his daily habits. He was ousted from the two rooms he had occupied under the warehouse, and was bastiled, with or without his consent—Laurence paid little heed to that—in the "green-room," which was furnished anew.



But, if Laurence had succeeded in effecting a radical transformation in the interior of the house, she had made a signal failure in her attempts at changing the habits and tastes of the two brothers. When in the autumn the two Barbels established themselves in the Rue du Bourg, they at once resumed their former way of living. Hyacinthe continued to spend the days in keeping his books and the evenings in reading. Germain divided his time between his business at the drug-shop and the pleasures of the chase ; he returned home in time for supper, hungry and tired—he ate like an ogre, and went off to bed at nine o'clock.

By degrees the house became just what it had been previously — silent, solitary, and closed to all visitors. A cold and penetrating somnolency seemed to pervade it and to fall from the roof—a heavy weight on the sumptuous apartments. Germain refused, in the most peremptory manner, to accompany his wife when she returned her wedding-visits : society frightened him, and, with the exception of Delphin Nivard, who occasionally took a seat in Hyacinthe's chimney-corner, no stranger was received at the Lafrognes'. Madame de Coulaines, to whom Villotte had always been an exile, had not long lingered there after her daughter's marriage. As soon as she had seen Laurence well established, she had shaken off the weight of years, regained her youth, and as now her modest income of three thousand



francs sufficed for her individual needs, she hastened back to Paris to resume there all the habits and acquaintances of yore.

At the beginning of winter, Laurence was alone—alone to all intents and purposes, in that large, luxurious home. When she had visited the mansion, of which she was the sovereign, from cellar to attic, when she had looked at herself in all the mirrors, and had sat in each one of the cushioned arm-chairs, she began to find her gilded life a trifle monotonous.

*Ennui*, as gray, subtle, and penetrating, as an October mist, reached her, even through the heavy *portières* and silken curtains of her rooms. It wrapped her all about during the long days, unoccupied hours, and the still longer evenings. She understood then the cruel truth of that rude song of the people that she had heard the villagers singing at Rembercourt—an old song, well known in Lorraine :

“What care I for riches,  
If riches bring no joy to me!

. . . . .  
The day I die I take with me  
Naught but a winding-sheet and a shirt.  
Rich I have lived and poor I die.  
Hurrah for death! hurrah!”

Of what use were all the elegant toilets which she could not display? At Villotte no one promenaded; the ladies there had no other recreation



than going to church and to market. Now, Laurence left this last amusement to Catherine ; and, as to church, as her piety was somewhat lukewarm, she contented herself with going on Sundays to low mass at eleven. As my readers will see, therefore, she rarely went out, and she was rapidly becoming wearied to death.

Even when the two Barbels were with her, the society of their two unexpansive, reserved natures had for her nothing exhilarating in it. Their domestic tastes and old-fashioned ideas—their commonplace conversation, always upon past days wherein Mademoiselle Lénette's name was of frequent occurrence—neither amused nor interested her, but rendered her very taciturn. Sometimes it seemed to Laurence that her brain was shrinking, that her youth was fading, in the constant companionship of these two men, who were so much older than their years, and she examined herself in her mirror with absolute terror, believing that she should find a deep wrinkle on her brow, or white threads among her black hair.

She had fits of unaccountable depression, ending in passionate floods of tears, of which she was heartily ashamed, and which she did her best to conceal.

The two brothers, with small experience in anything relating to women, knew not what course to adopt to lighten her melancholy. Germain, who had indulged each caprice and fancy



of his wife's, was persuaded that he had fulfilled every duty toward her, and was, moreover, keeping to the letter the promise that he had made—to make her happy. She had beautiful toilets—a luxurious home. What could she wish more, and why on earth could she not be content?

Besides, just at this time the two Barbels were absorbed in an occupation which left them little time to occupy themselves with the meaningless sadness of the young girl. They were arranging the accounts sent in by all the upholsterers, painters, and workmen, who had contributed to the embellishment of their house, and they saw, with horrified astonishment, that the sum total of their expenditures had far exceeded their anticipations. Having retained the strictly economical principles inculcated by their Aunt Lénette, they were much disturbed, and made many a wry face at the amount.

Hyacinthe was especially disturbed, and uttered many profound sighs and groans, lamenting more particularly that the new arrangements had left vacant the two excellent rooms in the warehouse. "It is a great pity," he murmured to Delphin Nivard—"a great pity, to throw away money in this way : those rooms ought to be utilized."

One morning the chief of bureau called upon the two brothers, and asked if they were serious in desiring to do something with those vacant rooms. "They have," he said, "a separate stair-



case and an entrance on the Rue de la Municipalité, so that really you would not suffer the smallest inconvenience, and you have quantities of old furniture to put into them if you should decide to let them. If you choose to put the matter into my hands I will arrange it for you. I know a young man of good habits and good family, sensible and quiet, who would be the very person, and a tenant of whom any landlord might be proud. He is in quest of a furnished apartment, and he would be only too happy to find it under your roof."

The tenant suggested by Nivard was a young advocate attached to the bar of Villotte, and answering to the name of Xavier Duprat. Germain making no objection, Hyacinthe went to make inquiries, and returned entirely satisfied with the result. Monsieur Duprat was already distinguished, his tastes were serious, his principles all that they should be, and his conduct entirely exemplary. He was a member of the Society of Saint-François de Regis, and offered every guarantee. The affair was concluded, then, through Nivard, and the new tenant was to take possession on April 1st.

On that day, in the afternoon, Laurence was occupied in arranging the vases of flowers in the small *salon* which she called her boudoir. Germain had gone on a fishing-excursion to Belval, Hyacinthe was out on business, when Catherine



announced that the lodger wished to speak to madame.

The lady nodded and indicated to the old servant that the new-comer might be shown in, whereupon Monsieur Xavier Duprat made his appearance. From all that she had heard her husband and brother-in-law say, Laurence had drawn in her imagination a ridiculous enough portrait of this magistrate in embryo. This lodger, patronized by Nivard and welcomed with such enthusiasm by the two Barbels, was, of course, some provincial, looking like a schoolmaster—awkward and clumsy in his ill-made black coat. She was more than agreeably surprised at the appearance of the visitor, who entered with a profound bow.

He was a tall and handsome fellow of about twenty-five. He wore a light-brown overcoat, which, thrown over his broad chest, showed a good figure in a tightly-buttoned coat ; light-gray pantaloons completed his simple toilet. The visitor's gloves and boots, as well as the immaculate whiteness of his fine linen, were all that they should be. He had not as yet shaved off his mustache in obedience to the mandate of the Villotte bar, and his beard was silky and chestnut brown, setting off to wonderful advantage the rich, warm complexion and brown eyes, which were as velvety and caressing as those of a woman.

“Madame,” he began, “I did not wish to in-



stall myself in your house without paying my respects to you, and telling you how happy I am in being allowed to call myself a lodger of Monsieur Lafrogne's."

His voice was as sweet and caressing as his look; perhaps even one might have preferred that the tones should have been less honeyed. But the voice was so melodious that it charmed instantaneously, and Laurence yielded at once to it, the more readily, possibly, because she was so totally unprepared for it. She was ashamed of the ideas in regard to him which she had taken into her head, and in her most amiable tone she asked the young man if he had moved into his apartment.

"Not yet," he answered; "I left my luggage at the foot of the staircase."

"Take a seat, monsieur," resumed Laurence. "I will give directions that it shall be carried up, and when things are in readiness you shall be informed."

She went out of the room for a moment, while the tenant looked around with some curiosity upon the arrangements of the small *salon* in which he was. All the details, from the violets breathing fragrance in their frail Venetian glasses, to the bright-colored silks scattered on a dainty work-table, spoke of youth, refinement, and coquetry, in the presiding goddess. The low, soft chairs, the tall Japanese screens, and the Persian rugs,



all emitted a delightful perfume of luxury and wealth.

"I have notified Catherine," said Laurence, returning, "and everything will soon be in readiness."

They sat for a few moments in silence, both uncertain of their own impressions, while the violets filled the warm atmosphere with their delicious odors. Laurence seemed somewhat intimidated by this unexpected *tête-à-tête*. Xavier Duprat, on the contrary, was perfectly undisturbed, and examined, with evident admiration, through his half-shut eyes, the pretty face and fresh toilet of his landlord's wife, who, somewhat embarrassed by the scrutiny, colored and moved her little foot with nervousness. At last, unable to endure a longer silence, she herself broke it:

"You have not been long in Villotte, I think, monsieur?"

He answered that he had just come from Paris, where he had taken his degree, and where he had lived for six years.

"You have been living in Paris?" she cried, eagerly. "I was there! In what quarter? I was born there!"

He named a street near the Luxembourg.

"Ah!" she said, with a long sigh; and, closing her beautiful eyes, she sat, with her head thrown slightly back, dreaming of the garden, as she had so often seen it on a spring afternoon:



the terrace, under the huge chestnut-trees, with the military band, arranged in a circle, and playing a waltz ; the students, with their swaggering airs, walking about in noisy companionship between the chairs ; the fresh green of the turf ; the dead white of the marble statues, thrown out against the lilac-hedge ; the water in the basin sparkling in the sunshine ; and here and there the harmonious fluttering of wings, as the ring-doves flew from the flowering chestnuts to the arms of a Mercury, or to the shoulder of a Diana. She was there again, in spirit—there in that dear old corner of Paris : she saw its every trifle ; she heard the gay shouts of the children at play, the braying of the copper-throated musical instruments, and even received an occasional whiff of the well-known odor of hot *gaufres*, mingling with the earthy smell of the flower-beds freshly turned up.

She shook her head lightly, opened her eyes, and saw the young man looking at her with respectful admiration.

“Pardon me,” she stammered, “I was thinking of the Luxembourg. I walked there so often in the days that I lived in Paris ! How could you ever leave it, monsieur, and come and bury yourself alive in Villotte ? What will you do with yourself in this country town ?”

He started slightly, drawing back with a shocked air ; and, assuming an imposing attitude much affected by young lawyers, he answered in



a melancholy, pretentious tone, which many an actor might have envied : “Madame, I work much, and I have no time for amusement. Besides, I am accustomed to solitude, and by no means averse to it.”

“You are fortunate,” she cried, gayly. “I, on the contrary, am not so made. I shall never become accustomed to a place where there is no theatre, nor a library, nor a book to be got. It is not enough to say that I am sick of the place, I loathe it. I am not *ennuyée* here, I am simply stupefied.”

He opened his eyes wide with a scandalized air. “In my library,” he said, in a tone of mild compassion, “are a number of books—works of our contemporary authors—will you permit me, madame, to place them at your disposal?”

She accepted the offer with cordial thanks, and at that moment Catherine entered to announce that the rooms were in readiness.

Xavier Duprat bowed profoundly, and they separated ; but, as he crossed his own threshold, the future magistrate smiled in his beard, and I am quite sure that his instinct taught him that he had left tokens of his presence in the warmed and scented boudoir of Madame Lafrogne.

In fact, he had sown there the germs of new sensations, whose rapid flowering would yield a better perfume, and which would be more lasting than the violets and hyacinths in the *jardinières*. After his departure Laurence sat for a long



time silent and thoughtful. It seemed to her that the sunshine was brighter and that the flowers had more of the freshness of spring in their fragrance. That evening at supper she told of Monsieur Duprat's visit, and praised the young man with enthusiasm. Hyacinthe agreed with all she said ; as to Germain, he had hardly seen his new tenant, but appeared much pleased that he suited his wife and his brother so well, and promised to return his visit during the week.

The installation of Monsieur Duprat in the house in the Rue du Bourg had imparted to Laurence's life an entirely new interest. The presence of this fine-looking young man—a man of the world as well as a student—seemed to have rejuvenated and aroused the sleeping household. The days were less long to Madame Lafrogne, and that night she went off to sleep, soothed by the pleasant thought that in the morning, when she opened her window, she should see Xavier at his.

The windows of the small *salon* opened on the court, and faced those of Monsieur Duprat's study ; and the following evening, as she watered her flowers, Laurence cast a shy glance opposite, and caught a glimpse of the young man as he sat at work at his desk. She saw him rise and come to the window, where he leaned with a thoughtful air. Suddenly he perceived Madame Lafrogne, and, bowing ceremoniously, retreated with haste, as if he feared to be suspected of indiscretion.



## CHAPTER VI.

XAVIER DUPRAT was the fourth child of a lawyer at Metz. His parents, having three daughters to settle in life, had given to their son as his sole patrimony a careful education and advantageous introductions. After he had got through college, he was sent to Paris for a course at the law-school.

The young man left home having in his pocket only about eighteen hundred francs, but furnished with an ample provision of wise counsels, very similar to those given by Polonius to his son Hamlet : never to conflict or outrage in any way the principles of law and order ; never to set at defiance *les bienséances*, nor give offense to persons in authority ; to cultivate intimacies with people higher than himself on the social ladder ; to be attentive and courteous to elderly women, and to distrust his first impulses ; to speak little, and hear a great deal. Young Duprat, endowed with unbounded ambition, strong will, and a crafty mind, followed these parental instructions to the very letter, and had, in consequence, met with such success in the world that he was received at Villotte as a man far on the road to distinction. He was regarded as having serious aims in life, and destined eventually to attain the highest positions. Educated by the good Fathers of the



Collège St.-Augustin, he had early learned to conduct himself with prudence and skill, and, at a period when a certain amount of religious austerity had come temporarily into vogue, he understood the secret of combining in judicious proportion a devout bearing with worldly amusements ; assisting on the same day at the conferences of the Lazarist Fathers, and going later to a ball at the prefect's ; adding to his air of religious devotion the amiable varnish of a man of good society ; in a word, he was polite, insinuating, courteous, and politic. Were these not qualities to insure his worldly success ?

He did wonders in this little town, where mothers cited him as an example to their adolescent sons, and where fathers of marriageable daughters greeted him with encouraging smiles. Astute and cunning as he was, he quickly perceived the impression that he had produced on Madame Lafrogne. More than one man of his age would have yielded to the temptation. The lady was pretty, elegant, and wealthy—in a position to greatly flatter the vanity of a man of gallantry. Besides, it was very evident that her husband neglected her, and that she was utterly wearied by the life she led, and that she would have small reluctance to accept a consoler. But Xavier Duprat was prudent, and had the faculty of looking into the future ; and, while his twenty-five years rebelled against this dull town, so empty of



all resources, he yet determined in no way to compromise and bring remarks upon himself, but to take each step with the most excessive caution. The forbidden fruit tempted him sorely, but he preferred that the branch should come to him and put it into his hands. In short, compromising with his conscience in a manner that is by no means rare in natures that are more adroit than honest, he had no objection to sinning, provided that in the eyes of the world he could be regarded as a man who had sinned in spite of himself, and against his own wishes !

Consequently, he took care not to profit by the permission accorded by Laurence, to carry her himself the books of which he had spoken. For a fortnight he kept away, contenting himself with respectful glances in the direction of her window. He was rewarded for his patience, for one fine Sunday he received a ceremonious visit from Germain Lafrogne.

Xavier Duprat appeared to his landlord in the guise of a serious and somewhat reserved young man—entirely absorbed in his business. The conversation was affable and cordial. On leaving, Germain said to Xavier :

“By-the-way, my wife begged me to remind you that you promised to lend her some books.”

Xavier excused himself on the ground of his numerous occupations, and proposed that Monsieur de Lafrogne should carry the volumes himself.



“Madame Lafrogne’s request is perhaps a trifle indiscreet,” resumed the husband; “excuse her. She is a great reader, and devours everything she can find. Our own library is but poorly furnished.”

Xavier took from a shelf “Valentine,” “La Confession d’un Enfant du Siècle,” and the “Poésies de Musset.” These books he intrusted to Germain, who carried them off most innocently, knowing nothing of them, not even the names of the authors.

For a devotee, the choice was somewhat singular; but Xavier thought probably that it was necessary to give to people the books best adapted to their tastes; and that feminine minds, like feminine stomachs, liked dainties better than solid meats.

Before making his appearance at the Lafrognes’ again, he waited patiently until the books of De Musset and George Sand had produced all their effects on the young imagination of the girl. He made no attempt to see her except from his window, from which post he bowed to her both morning and evening. He, however, grasped every opportunity of intercourse with the husband, whom he even accompanied one afternoon to the farm at Rembercourt. Laurence was not with them, and Germain, with the true spirit of the owner of a landed estate, showed his guest every nook and corner—his kennels and stables, and his granaries



—and took him back to town that night thoroughly fatigued.

Germain was enchanted with his new acquaintance. “He is a very nice fellow,” he said to his wife and Hyacinthe. “He is at once a student and an agreeable companion; a trifle too ceremonious, perhaps, but there are worse faults than that. I asked him to take pot-luck with us to-night, but he would not come up. He made such a host of excuses that I let him go, for I really could not take him by the collar, you know!”

Laurence smiled superciliously, but in her heart she was excessively annoyed. She could not understand Xavier’s extreme reserve. For two weeks the “crystallization” of which De Stendahl speaks had been going on in the young woman. Spring-time, with its soft languors, the books sent by Monsieur Duprat—all lent their influence to this silent blossoming of love.

Buried in the luxurious cushions of her *chaise longue*, behind the curtains of her sunny windows, Laurence devoured “Les Nuits,” and from time to time cast a glance through the parted folds of muslin at Xavier’s window. Sometimes, at an early hour in the morning, or at twilight, she would catch a glimpse of him as he turned over his books. After supper, she would intrench herself behind her blinds, and spend an hour or two watching him as he moved about his study, softly lighted by a shaded lamp upon his desk.



The young man did not close his windows until late into the night. Crouched in the darkness, Laurence could distinguish books piled upon the table, and the polished globe of the lamp, around which hovered a host of winged things, attracted from the outer air by the light within. She saw Xavier's clear-cut profile as he leaned over his papers, and watched him as he moved from his desk to his book-shelves. She thought him superbly handsome, haughty, and sad, like the Bénédict in "Valentine." She endowed him with all the passionate and disdainful melancholy of Musset's heroes, and she compassionated him that his life was so lonely. She envied the very butterflies who could go into his room so unceremoniously and flutter around his table. She would have given much to be able to penetrate, all unknown to him, to this austere apartment, and to appear to him suddenly, like the consoling Muse of the "Nuit de Mai."

One morning it so chanced that she was enabled to gratify this fancy, and she found it impossible to resist the temptation. Xavier was in court, and the chambermaid who had the care of the lodger's rooms came to Laurence for fresh white curtains for his study-windows. After a moment's hesitation, she determined to accompany the woman under the pretext of returning the books she had borrowed. "After all," she said to herself, "where is the harm? Is it not the right thing



for the mistress of the house to attend personally to all the details of housekeeping?" In spite of this sagacious argument, her heart beat quickly as she ascended Duprat's private stairs.

As soon as she entered the room she saw that the curtains were too short—a hem must be ripped and a facing put on: the maid took them away to make the necessary alterations; and Laurence, being now left alone, had ample leisure to investigate the sanctuary made precious by Xavier's daily presence and toil.

The room bore a close resemblance to its absent occupant—elegant yet severe in its style. One side of the study was occupied by an enormous bookcase, with glass doors, well filled with rows of books in brown bindings. An enormous ivory crucifix upon a ground of black velvet faced the desk. The walls were heavily hung with engravings after Ary Scheffer, representing "Saint Augustin and Sainte-Monica," and "Mignon."

Upon the chimney was a bronze bust of D'Aguesseau standing between two jars, in which grew plants with foliage of a dull metallic green. The writing-table was encumbered with manuscripts and law-books; in a corner, on a *guéridon*, were carelessly thrown a pair of pearl-gray gloves, a prayer-book, and a photograph-album.

This last strongly excited Laurence's curiosity. She scrutinized the Russia-leather binding and the



steel clasps, and some demon impelled her to open it. These albums are generally a sort of private museum, whose portraits may furnish a keen observer with more than one glimpse into the present and the past of their owner. Laurence was wild to see the faces in Xavier's album. The maid would be occupied for at least an hour in lengthening those curtains ; Duprat could not leave the court-room until eleven, and it was now just ten ; she would be undisturbed, therefore, for some time, and she could gratify her curiosity. She quickly snapped the clasps and opened the volume. The first pages were filled by the portraits of Xavier's father and mother ; then came three extremely ugly girls—his sisters, probably. These were followed by a succession of grave-looking personages, wearing decorations and white cravats—the solemn faces of old magistrates. After these came a collection of ecclesiastics—reverend fathers with gentle faces—monks with the worn features of ascetics ; worldly and smiling abbés. Laurence pursued her investigations, somewhat reassured by all this pious and venerable assemblage, but still fearing with each leaf she turned that she should behold some woman's face, young and pretty, whose very presence would reveal a mystery of love. Suddenly the door opened, and Xavier Duprat, bearing his green bag stuffed full of papers, appeared before the startled eyes of his inquisitive visitor.



She uttered a sharp little cry, shut the album hastily, and an intense blush suffused her fair face from chin to brow.

Xavier looked at her with an air of astonishment mingled with severity, and a dash of sarcasm was apparent in his voice, wherein was also a slight tone of secret satisfaction. "You, madame, here in my room!" he said. He closed the door carefully, threw his bag and papers on a chair, and took several steps toward the culprit, who stood ashamed in silence with her eyes cast down.

"Oh, sir!" she murmured in intense confusion. "Forgive me, I beg of you! The curtains were too short—Marianne has gone to lengthen them, and—"

"And you remained—so I see," said the young man, completing her sentence still in the same stern, hard voice.

She did not know where to look, and confusedly repeated, turning away her eyes: "I am so sorry. Forgive me for the indiscretion I have been guilty of in opening this book."

"That is nothing," he replied, ironically. "We will not speak of that. But you have probably forgotten that in a small town like this the most innocent acts have the most evil constructions put upon them. What would the world say did they know that you were here?"

"Oh!" answered Laurence, haughtily throw-



ing back her head. "I am fortunately above the reach of gossips. The only wrong I have committed was to open this album, and I shall be truly distressed if you will not accept my apologies."

"I repeat that that is a matter of no consequence whatever," he observed, still cold and grave.

"I see by your tone that you bear me malice, monsieur. Will you not say before I leave that you will forget as well as forgive?"

"Certainly, madame—certainly."

"Good-by, sir," and she extended her hand; but he, unmoved from his *rôle* of Puritan, feigned not to see the delicate hand, and merely bowed ceremoniously. She stood motionless and acutely mortified by his haughty disdain. Shame, anger, and nervous excitement, caused by this most unexpected scene and rebuff, brought the tears to her eyes, and in a moment more they rolled down her cheeks.

This artless girlishness was so charming that the young lawyer was touched through his armor of icy dignity and assumed puritanical reserve. Her tears stirred the depths of his nature. In short, he had achieved his purpose. Laurence was compromised—had compromised herself—and no one could accuse him of having drawn the girl down the perilous path. After all, he wished no harm to the pretty sinner, and he would be merciful and relent! His eyes soft-



ened, and gradually assumed an expression of tenderness ; he took one of Laurence's hands in both of his. "My dear madame," he murmured, "let me in my turn ask forgiveness."

His voice thrilled her with its sweetness. He drew up an arm-chair and forced Laurence to take it, then leaning paternally on the back, he looked down upon her with eyes full of admiration and indulgence.

Laurence, though reassured by this transformation, was still too much disturbed to speak, and merely turned toward him with an expression of lively gratitude, her superb eyes swimming in tears, while a faint smile parted her scarlet lips.

"Ah," she sighed, "how thankful I am that you are not really vexed with me, even if you did not wish to have me here !"

"Not wish to have you here !" he repeated, as he leaned over her. "Can you form any idea of the emotion I felt when, returning to my solitary room, I found you here—you in all your youth and beauty?"

He whispered these words in her very ear, and his lips touched the ripples of her abundant hair. Laurence sighed, and submitted more and more to the influence of his caressing voice, of his soft eyes fixed on hers, and, involuntarily fascinated, she turned her head toward him.

"That will never do !" she murmured ; "af-



ter having lectured me, you think to make amends by compliments ! ”

“They are not compliments—I merely express my honest feelings.”

As he uttered this last word, his head stooped still lower, and his lips slowly pressed two long kisses on the eyes which were smilingly uplifted to his.

Startled by this lingering caress, and utterly astounded, she did not at first repulse him ; but in an instant she realized the truth ; her conscience stung her—she was horrified at the audacity of the young man, and at all she had done and permitted. Then, at once intoxicated and ashamed—scarlet, and with downcast eyes—she started to her feet, repulsed the hands which sought to snatch hers, and, without saying a single word, rushed to the door and disappeared.

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## CHAPTER VII.

XAVIER passed the afternoon thinking over the events and impressions of the morning. His vanity was profoundly flattered, for had he not touched the heart of a fashionable woman of the world—elegant, coquettish, and radiant, with all the fresh beauty of her nineteen years ! The taint of sensuality which lies within the depths of every human nature began to ferment. Extended



in the arm-chair which Laurence had occupied, he breathed again the delicate odor of violets with which all the laces and ribbons of the girl were permeated ; he closed his eyes, and lived over again each word, look, and act. On that day he made no effort to again disturb the solitude wherein Madame Lafrogne had intrenched herself. It seemed to him in better taste to show himself at first generous and reserved ; but the following morning he resolved to take another step onward, and, after making a most careful toilet, took two novels of Balzac as a motive for his visit, and started forth to call on Madame Lafrogne.

As he crossed the court-yard he met Germain. "Are you going to see my wife, Monsieur Duprat ?" exclaimed his landlord ; "it is of no use : you will not find her. She went to Rembercourt yesterday."

And, as the face of the young man lengthened involuntarily at this information, Germain continued : "We do not like it much, Hyacinthe and I, because we have work on hand which will keep us here into June, and we can therefore only spend Sundays with her there, but we could not oppose her wishes, as she says she is not well, and thinks that country air will do her a world of good. You know, when women take a notion into their heads, that it is no use to go contrary to them."

The young man returned to his rooms much



disappointed. This sudden flight adopted by Laurence deranged all his combinations, and yet one reflection mingled a drop of sweetness with all the bitterness of his discovery. It was clear that Madame Lafrogne was afraid of herself, or of him or of both, to have fled in this sudden fashion. This haste to depart showed him the extent of the fascination he had already exercised, and marked also the perception that Laurence had of her own weakness.

In fact, Xavier was correct in his diagnosis—Laurence was afraid. Like many a good woman, she thought a Platonic affection perfectly allowable—a most innocent distraction—and of which no husband should complain. She had pleased herself with the fancy that the love of this young man, so serious and elevated in his nature, would constantly hover in immaterial and angelic spheres; that between them no question of passion could ever arise, and that the thought of forbidden things would, like a tireless swallow, fly far above their heads, without ever alighting to rest its wearied wings—and the fall had been so swift! the ideal flight had been so brief! The lady was intensely irritated by those two impertinent kisses which had been pressed upon her eyes; and yet, amid all her irritation, she felt a certain intoxication as she recalled them, and also the caressing music of the words which Xavier had whispered in her ear.



As she had an honest nature which abhorred duplicity, she felt wretchedly uncomfortable in the presence of her husband and Hyacinthe. It seemed to her that they must see the traces of Xavier's kiss on her face—and in the presence of the two Barbels she dared not bestow a single thought upon her fascinating and audacious neighbor.

Consequently, she seized the first pretext which offered itself to take refuge at Rembercourt. In this retreat, happily situated between the river and a long tongue of the forest, Laurence believed that she should be both more protected and more at liberty. She had nothing to fear from the perilous vicinity of Xavier and his window; she could think of him, too, as much as she pleased, without blushing if she met her husband's eyes; she would enjoy all the delicate aroma of a *grande passion*, without being drawn into its dangerous vortex.

This innocent illusion was of no long duration. From the day after her departure, Xavier Duprat became an assiduous visitor to the forest. On leaving the little village of Fains, the wooded hill, which forms one of the slopes of the valley, advances like a promontory over the plain, overlooking the sleepy waters of a canal, and all the farm-buildings. From the summit, a cutting in the forest-trees, directly in front of Rembercourt, permitted one to look directly down, without being



himself seen, into the heart of the gardens and courts. It was in this spot that Xavier installed himself day after day. Lying at full length in the breezy shade, he calmly watched from this observatory all that went on at the farm. To gratify his eyes during the long hours when he lay in ambush, the valley displayed all the wealth of her summer garb. The orchards, where the cherries were reddening in the sun, were full of singing birds ; the meadows, with their many tints of green, waved and rustled in the soft summer air, while here and there were patches of warmer tones ; between the willows and the poplars the river glittered like melted silver ; and, on the other shore, rose the hills of Varney and De Bussy, their banks of phosphorescent green thrown out against the blue sky. Amid all this there were flights of pigeons, a melodious rush of wings ; there were the crowing of cocks from the farm, the loud snap of a whip-lash from the highway, and the swift passage of a railway-train, which crossed the valley, with a sharp whistle from the locomotive. But Xavier Duprat, caring little for Nature, was absorbed in one thing—the small house with green blinds, which stood in one angle of the farm. Armed with a lorgnette, he had for his objective point this secluded dwelling, whose sunny whiteness was half hidden by the trees in the orchard. He indulged the hope that Laurence, weary of her seclusion, would be



tempted by the freshness of the forest, and that she would come to the wood. At last, one fine day, his patience was rewarded. He saw Madame Lafrogne open the door which looked toward the forest, and come rapidly down the slope and across the canal, and then disappear behind the trees. As fleet as a goat he sprang along the shady path, and, as Laurence was advancing in the opposite direction, it was not long before, on suddenly turning an angle in the path, she met Xavier Duprat face to face.

She stifled a cry of surprise, turned scarlet, and stood still at the foot of a beech-tree.

"Pardon me, madame," said Xavier, bowing very low—"pardon me for having startled you. Believe me when I say that, in spite of appearances, my presence here is entirely unpremeditated. For the last week I have been oppressed with the solitude of my rooms. Your blinds, so persistently closed, have made me doubly sensible of my loneliness; and, in desperation, I threw aside my books and work, and rushed out into the air. A secret attraction impelled me in this direction, but I was far from dreaming of the indiscretion of disturbing your solitude. Chance alone is to blame for it."

Laurence believed of this speech as much and as little as she pleased, but the attitude of the young man was so full of respectful admiration, his voice had such tender inflections, his gentle,



submissive air offered so strong a contrast to his audacity of the week previous, that she came to the conclusion that an excess of rigor would be simply ridiculous ; instead, therefore, of retreating, she continued her way by his side in the path, which was so narrow that two persons could not walk there without touching each other.

Xavier's tongue was golden, and the conversation did not languish. Side by side, arm-in-arm, they loitered along the mossy path ; the sunlight, flickering through the branches of the beech-trees, rained luminous drops upon the grass and leaves ; in this *chiaro-oscuro* blue columbines and tall spotted orchids lifted their lovely heads, while in the heart of the forest the goldhammer's delicate, flute-like warble arose above the deep bass of the ring-dove's cooing.

Without any absurd declamation, with an easy grace, and with sufficient melancholy, Xavier spoke of his great loneliness, of the need he felt at times of some friend who would cure him of his occasional attacks of homesickness. He had had such a happy childhood—his mother adored him ! The future judge understood to a marvelous degree how to play upon the strings of maternal sentiment and family joys. Laurence listened to him with continually-increasing sympathy. The beauty of this June afternoon added still more to the charm of the young man's words, and during several hours Laurence rested under the



charm, so that the sun was already low when she thought of returning to the farm. He went back with her to the edge of the forest, and succeeded in obtaining from her the promise of appearing the next day at the same place.

She kept her word. Both of them enjoyed this playing truant in the forest-depths. The lovely weather, the delicious intoxication of a new-born love, the piquant flavor of forbidden fruit, and, above all, the frank audacity of youth, enabled Laurence to forget the perils of these clandestine hours. As to Xavier Duprat, enchanted by the turn that matters had taken, he yet showed himself delicate and reserved, taking excellent care not to risk the situation by too rapid attacks. He therefore remained respectful and prudent. With all the prudence of a man of the world and of refinement, he cared little for endearments in a spot which a wood-cutter or a guard could come up and interrupt. He was like a schoolboy who has stolen some beautiful fruit, and who, knowing that he has it in security in the bottom of his pocket, contents himself by touching it with his finger from time to time, while waiting for an hour when he may enjoy it at his leisure.

He came to the conclusion that, when he had obtained complete control of Laurence, and held her in absolute subjection, it would be easy to insinuate himself into the good graces of the



two Barbels, who were just the people to lead by the nose. He would become the friend of the house, the preferred guest, and, without endangering his reputation, without compromising his future, without making any scandal, he could find in that comfortable dining-room good quarters, good suppers, and much more.

An unfortunate incident spoiled this pleasing plan. Up to this time fine weather had favored the two young people ; but one afternoon, while they were in the forest, the sky grew dark, and a sudden clap of thunder told them that a storm was near at hand. They were on the slope which leads down toward Fains, and a flash of lightning showed them the valley dark with overhanging black clouds. The river, too, was black ; heavy masses of fog and rain were beginning to hide the hills under gray drapery. They could not remain in the forest without shelter, and they ran along the path in search of a shelter less penetrable than the branches of the beeches. At the base of the hill there was a brewery, well known to sportsmen and anglers, who were in the habit of lingering there when the fish refused to bite. Laurence and Xavier, running rapidly, rushed into the press-room, one of the out-buildings of the establishment, and there, hidden behind the vats, waited for the end of the tempest. It was so dark in this building, which was lighted but dimly by the door at the best of times, that they had little fear of



being recognized. At the termination of a half-hour the thunder-claps were less frequent, and the lightning less vivid and farther off. The rain diminished, and one ray of sunshine pierced the darkness of the press-room, and announced to the two fugitives that they could again betake themselves to flight.

As they left their shelter, just under the porch, they fell into the arms of a person who was running toward them, drenched with rain, and who was evidently seeking refuge in the brewery. Now, by a most unfortunate chance, this unknown was no other than Delphin Nivard ! Laurence was the first to recognize him. "Let us run," she said, in a low voice to Xavier ; "it is Monsieur Nivard !"

They hurried away. When they had gone a hundred yards or so, Xavier said, "Are you sure that it was he ?"

"I am, indeed," she answered, "particularly as he was to dine at the farm to-day with Hyacinthe and Monsieur Lafrogne."

Xavier Duprat turned and looked back with an anxious air. It was indeed Nivard. He was standing on the threshold, and with his hand shading his eyes was evidently watching the figures of the retreating couple as they disappeared in the fading mists of the storm.

"How maddening !" murmured Xavier Duprat, whose face grew dark.



Laurence was as much disturbed as her companion, but, seeing his anxiety, she wished to reassure him.

"Pshaw!" she said, "his eyes are wretched, and he really only saw our backs. I will hasten to Rembercourt, and change my dress before he can get there, which will of course put him off the track. To-morrow morning be at the entrance of the wood, and I will tell you all that has happened."

They parted at once. The next day at three o'clock Xavier was still awaiting Madame Lafrogne at the indicated rendezvous.

The same day at two, the employés in Nivard's office were excessively astonished at seeing their chief take off his alpaca sleeves, brush his hat, and vacate his leather chair. Delphin Nivard was a model of assiduous industry, and this conduct was so utterly abnormal that it stupefied all the quill-drivers in his division. The chief of bureau passed through two or three crooked streets, reached the canal and took a path along its side, which led him directly to the farm. It was the longest way, but it was also the least frequented. He thus, masked by the overhanging trees, reached the lower edge of the forest, and there, with the agility of a wild-cat and the cunning of a poacher, he found his way through the underbrush, and reached an opening which commanded an entire view of Rembercourt.



The clock on the church-tower had just struck half-past three, when Laurence left the farm and entered the path where Duprat was awaiting her.

"Well?" he asked, looking at the somewhat pale face of the lady, with the scrutinizing eyes of a judge who holds a witness under examination.

"Do not be troubled," she answered; "I do not think that Nivard had any suspicion. When he reached the farm, my whole costume had been changed. He seemed just the same as usual, and did not utter one word which could lead me to believe that he thought of me in connection with the lady whom he had seen earlier in the afternoon. I know the nature of the man so well that I am convinced that, if he had the smallest suspicion, he would not have hesitated to make some malicious allusions, for he is by no means fond of me, and would be quite willing to do me a mischief."

"No matter," answered Xavier, abruptly; "these walks—this strolling about in broad daylight—are the height of imprudence, and they must be given up."

She looked at him with eyes full of sorrowful surprise.

"Very well, then," she murmured, "since you desire it."

"It is for your sake," he sighed, in a tone of hypocritical self-abnegation.



She shrugged her shoulders and drew down the corners of her mouth in a rebellious fashion.

"Besides," he insinuated gently, "it seems to me that there are other ways of seeing each other—ways more simple and less hazardous."

"What are they?"

"You are alone nearly every evening in the week; what prevents you from receiving me at Rembercourt?"

"It is impossible!—absolutely impossible! What would the farmers and servants think?"

"Your house is separated by the garden from the farm, and all the people go to sleep, like the chickens, at nightfall."

"I am not alone—Marianne is with me."

"Your maid? She sleeps in the attic and you on the first floor. You can get rid of her at an early hour, and, if you have the door unlocked, it will be very easy for me to come in—"

"I will never consent to it—never!" she repeated, vehemently. "It would be infamous—utterly disgraceful! No—never!"

"The disgrace would simply lie in the scandal which would arise should it ever be known," he answered, in a hard, sharp voice, which was new to her ear. "Rather than expose you to evil tongues, and run the constant risks which you suffer in these walks in the forests, I will give up seeing you altogether."

Her head drooped, and she was silent for a few



moments. "No," she murmured, as if she were speaking to herself—"no, I cannot permit him to come clandestinely to Rembercourt. To allow such a thing would be absolute treachery on my part."

"Do you prefer, then, that I should climb the wall?" he asked, ironically.

She was innocent enough to take this bravado in earnest. "Do not think of such a thing!" she exclaimed in terror. "The dogs are let loose at night, and they would leap at your throat!"

He saw at once how he could work on her girlish credulity and fears, and continued in a resolute tone: "I shall make the attempt to-night, at half-past nine," he continued, "and we will see what Monsieur Lafrogne's dogs will have to say about it."

"But it is absolute madness!" she cried, clasping her hands entreatingly.

"I assure you that I am in earnest. To-morrow night I will scale the wall—at least I will do so if you refuse to open the door!"

"It is impossible!"

"That is your last word? Very well, then—to-morrow night expect me, unless something should happen." With an offended air he left her abruptly, and disappeared down the path, before she could find a word to say in reply.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

ABOUT one o'clock the next afternoon the two Barbels were at work in their dusty little room, which smelt of the samples of dye-stuffs that incumbered the tables and were suspended on the walls. Musty ledgers, and the bills and accounts of the house, put on files, filled every available space. It was excessively warm; through the open windows, shaded by clambering nasturtiums and clematis, instead of blinds, came the soft buzz of the honey-bees in the balsam-beds; and an occasional breeze passing through the larger room brought with it the odor of ginger and nutmegs.

Hyacinthe, perched on his high stool at his desk, with the legs of his pantaloons carefully pulled up that they might not be wrinkled at the knees, was at work copying from his day-book, and between the crossbars of his stool were to be seen his thin ankles incased in gray hose. Germain, with his pipe between his teeth, was opening a huge pile of letters, just brought in from the noon mail.

Among these commercial dispatches, on blue paper, a letter post-marked "Villotte" attracted his attention. In a small town it is an unusual occurrence for its inhabitants to employ the post



to communicate with their neighbors. The superscription of the envelope bore the name of Germain Lafrogne, in the hand of a schoolboy. The younger Barbel broke the seal, and began to read. Suddenly he dashed his pipe on the table, and uttered an exclamation, which made Hyacinthe start and look around. Germain was deadly pale, and his hands trembled.

"What is it, boy?" asked his brother, in astonishment.

Germain handed him the letter.

"Look! See what some one has written," he murmured, in a strange, hoarse voice.

Hyacinthe, in his turn, read the letter, which was in these words:

"Monsieur Germain Lafrogne is advised to beware of his tenant, who is too often seen in the vicinity of Rembercourt. Monsieur Lafrogne is also informed that, if he wishes to know why his wife was in such haste to go to the farm, and to be satisfied as to the extent of her intimacy with Monsieur Duprat, he has only to repair to Rembercourt himself to-night after dark."

The note was signed "Good Intentions."

"It is infamous!" cried Hyacinthe.

"Very true," replied Germain; "but the person who sent the letter knew what he was saying, and has sent a knife through my heart."

"Come, now!" returned the elder Barbel, in a tone that he endeavored to make reassuring,



"I think you know too much to pay any attention to an anonymous letter."

"I should like not to believe it ; but what object could any one have in writing it to me ? We have no enemies."

"But plenty of envious persons surround us. And, then, there is such a thing as a joke—poor though it may be, I admit."

"Such jokes as this one are rarely perpetrated," answered Germain, gloomily, as he closed the window. "Since reading that letter many an incident has been recalled to me, to which, at the time, I attached no importance. I have realized, too, for the first time, that Laurence is very young, and that I am double her age. She is fond of pleasure, and we are not amusing ; then, I am a bear, and this gentleman up-stairs has most courtly manners."

"But he is high-principled and religious. I cannot believe him capable of such baseness."

"You know nothing of the world, Hyacinthe ; you judge others by yourself. Look here ! neither you nor I know anything of women. How I wish that night would come ! This suspense is intolerable !"

"Do you mean to go to the farm to-night ?"

"Do I mean to go to the farm ?" repeated Germain, in a tone of intense irritation. "What a question !"

"Listen, boy !" resumed the good Hyacinthe,



after a moment's thought. "Take my advice. Set out at once for Rembercourt. If this accusation has the smallest foundation, it is much better to prevent the evil than to punish it. Your presence will prevent your wife from committing a fault, and will save both you and herself much misery."

"No," replied Germain, sharply. "Now that suspicion has entered my brain, such a step would not dissipate it. Supposing I should find Laurence established quietly in her garden, and that nothing should take place to-night, I should be all the time saying to myself, 'If I had not come, what would have happened?' and I should be incessantly tormented with doubts. No, should my heart be broken by what I see and hear, I must still go to the farm to-night, without being seen or expected, and then I shall know the truth."

"You must let me go with you."

"Come, then, if you choose. Now, let us resume our work, and be patient."

They took up their pens, but the heart of neither was in his labors. The columns of figures swam before their eyes, and their thoughts were elsewhere. The hours passed slowly enough; they seemed absolutely interminable, in the silence and gloom. The Barbels heard their tenant, Xavier Duprat, enter his rooms, and draw his chair up to his desk. Hyacinthe made a significant gesture, pointing with his pen to the ceil-



ing, as if to say : " You see, he is up there ; it is all a calumny ! " To which Germain replied by a shrug of his shoulders. The sun by degrees left the glowing blossoms of the nasturtiums, lingered at the next windows above, and then touched the summit of the roof alone. In the court, still fragrant with spice, all was shadow, the humming of the bees had ceased ; then came Catherine to say that dinner was ready. They scarcely swallowed a mouthful ; the food stuck in their throats, and they sat with their elbows on the table in utter silence, the dessert untouched in front of them, until the twilight darkened the oak panels in the room.

" Let us go," said the younger Lafrogne, as he pulled his felt hat over his eyes. " We will take the Route des Romains."

They passed down the Rue du Bourg, through several winding streets, and took the road which passes the Chanteraine vineyards.

They walked without speaking. The night was dark, and without a moon—was appropriate for a rendezvous. When they were in the vicinity of Rembercourt, instead of following the road, they kept close to the walls which marked the boundaries of the farm, and then crossed the meadows. On the side toward the river there was a little door in the wall, of which Germain always kept the key. Through that door the brothers entered the enclosure, where all was



silent, save the nocturnal song of the crickets, whose monotonous chirps seemed like the breath of the slumbering meadows.

During this time a peaceful calm was far from reigning within the rooms occupied by Laurence. Behind the closed blinds two voices disturbed the silence of the night : that of Laurence by turns entreating and irritated, the other insinuating and manly, and much resembling that of Monsieur Duprat. It was Xavier, in fact, whom Laurence had been foolish and headstrong enough to admit. Fearing that he would scale the wall, as he had threatened, she dared not lock the gate leading toward the forest. At nightfall, when it was quite certain that the *femme de chambre* had retired to her back-room in the attic, Duprat quietly walked into the small *salon* on the lower floor, where a light led him to suppose that he should find Madame Lafrogne.

Once established there, he promised himself not to be easily ousted, regarding this dainty, comfortable room as infinitely preferable to the damp forest. He employed his most persuasive eloquence to induce her to permit him to remain. He tossed his hat aside with scant ceremony, and stood quite undisturbed by all Madame Lafrogne's entreaties.

"Be reasonable," she said, as she pushed a large arm-chair as a barrier between herself and him, and, leaning on the back, she repeated, "be rea-



sonable. I have given you the strongest possible proof of my confidence in you—do not force me to repent of it; and now leave me, I beg of you!”

“You are cruel, madame,” he replied, in a tone that was at once bold and insinuating; “after having brought me within sight of the promised land, do you suppose that I shall be contented with a distant view? You think me more heroic than I am.”

“I think you are a man of honor—too much of a gentleman, and too much of a man of the world, to remain in the house of a woman against her will.”

“Love is not so respectful as you seem to imagine, madame; and I love you too passionately not to occasionally throw aside ordinary conventionalities. I will add,” he continued, with a slightly sarcastic intonation, “that, the morning I found you in my room, you showed me very clearly that you, too, could sometimes rise above the prejudices of social life.”

“If I was reckless and foolish,” she murmured, coloring deeply, and casting down her eyes, “it is not generous in you either to remind me of it or to take advantage of it.”

“Forgive me! but are you, in your turn, altogether generous in destroying thus rudely the hope which you were the first to encourage?”

“What hope?” she exclaimed, angrily. “Explain yourself, for I fail to understand you.”



“If I have been bold enough to hope,” he replied, “is it not because from the very beginning I have been encouraged? There are looks which are almost an oath of love, and I believe that I have read such a meaning in your eyes. In my loneliness I loved you silently, and as one without hope; but, permit me to recall to you once more that it was you who drove me from the barrier of reserve behind which I had intrenched myself. It is you who are ungenerous—you, who are selfish in rejecting my love after encouraging me to believe that you returned it.”

Indelicate as were these reproaches, they were well merited, and struck home to Madame Lafrogne’s heart. Her head drooped in embarrassment at these thrusts. She realized that the contest was most unequal; nevertheless she had no thought of surrender, and she continued to struggle against the natural and most dangerous consequences of her previous heedlessness.

“I was thoughtless,” she murmured. “I had no thought of levity,” and tears filled her eyes. “I was blind; but all you say will make me wiser in future, and never again will I merit similar reproaches.”

“It is somewhat late in the day,” he answered, with a smile, as he put his hand on the chair to roll it aside.

“No, sir,” said Laurence, recoiling against the wall, and retaining her hold on the back of the



*fauteuil* in which she found protection ; “if you do not leave me at once, I swear to you that I will call Marianne !”

“You will not do that,” answered Xavier, calmly ; “for such an act would be the height of folly. No human being would believe that I came here without your consent. My presence at such an hour could only be explained by a complaisance on your part, and an *esclandre* would compromise me without excusing yourself.”

This pitiless logic overwhelmed Laurence : she felt herself to be at the mercy of this man ; he held her morally in the hollow of his hands, and her powers of resistance grew momentarily weaker.

“Ah !” she stammered, in despair, “you are not the man I took you for. Where is your chivalry ? It is the conduct of a coward !”

“No,” he answered ; but his tone had changed, and his voice was tender and caressing—“no, it is the conduct of a lover !—a lover whose heart is full of passionate adoration of you and your beauty ! Why are you so lovely ? Seeing you, I forget everything else. Do not be cruel ; let me lie at your feet and worship you ! I swear to you to be faithful and discreet ; I swear to devote to you all my youth, all my life ! You shall be the queen of my heart, the sovereign of all my thoughts. I will give you the happiness of which you have dreamed, and which you have



never known, and we two will cherish the blessed secret. Grant me your confidence ; permit me to love you and serve you ! ”

As he spoke he knelt at her feet so closely that he touched the folds of her dress. He tried to take the hands which she withdrew. Her eyes were riveted on his ; fascinated and trembling, she felt that the moment was at hand when she could no longer defend herself.

Suddenly she heard the gravel on the garden-path crunch under rapid steps. Xavier started to his feet.

“ Sultan ! Médor ! here ! ” exclaimed Germain, in a voice of thunder.

“ My husband ! I am lost ! ” murmured Laurence, leaning half fainting against the wall.

The outer door opened. Duprat, pale and terrified, rushed toward the window, and, throwing open the blinds, was about to leap into the garden, when before him appeared the tall form of Hyacinthe flanked by the two watch-dogs, who growled in a most significant fashion.

“ No one passes this way,” said the elder Barbel, phlegmatically ; “ go back ! ”

Xavier recoiled, uncertain and bewildered, and found himself face to face with Germain, who had just entered the apartment.

The husband’s eyes surveyed the room, and riveted themselves on Laurence still standing between the wall and the *fauteuil* ; then turned



upon Duprat, who had started back from Hyacinthe's presence as from a spectre.

With one bound Germain darted on the incipient magistrate, and, seizing him by his cravat, launched at him the most opprobrious epithet known in the whole Meusian vocabulary—" *Malabre!* "

"No violence, monsieur," stammered Duprat. "I will make no resistance, but do not be a brute."

With his wandering eyes, his pallid face, and trembling voice, his appearance was most pitiable. Germain looked in the face of this tall fellow, whose manliness seemed to have taken flight, and whom terror had rendered as powerless as a woman. He took compassion upon him, and, regaining his self-possession as rapidly as the other had lost his, contented himself with shaking his treacherous lodger fiercely, and pushing him into an arm-chair, in which Duprat sat as helpless as a bundle of wet linen.

"I do not choose to have any *esclandre* here," said Germain, "and consequently I will not injure a hair of your head."

He went to the door, which was open, closed it carefully, and returned.

"Listen to me," he resumed, slowly and distinctly—"listen to me. I should like to wring your neck as I would a chicken's ; and you know very well that your tribunal would punish me in no way whatever. But you are not worth the



trouble. You will leave Villotte at once ; arrange your affairs so that after to-morrow I no longer shall find you in the town ; for, if ever I meet you in my path, nothing will restrain me ; and, as true as there is a God above, I will murder you then and there ! Now be off with you ! —Hyacinthe, take him to the gate.”

Monsieur Duprat did not linger, and, with tottering limbs, bowed shoulders, and downcast eyes, bareheaded, and with disordered hair, turned toward the door, not daring to hazard a glance at Laurence.

“You have forgotten your hat,” said Germain, in a calmly contemptuous tone.

Xavier turned back timidly, snatched his hat, and put it on with a quick, uneasy gesture ; and, opening the door, went out on tiptoe. While he disappeared in the darkness, Germain stood with his arms folded, his face turned toward the door ; his tall, manly form, square shoulders, and fine head, were fronting Laurence, who had looked on like a statue at this unexpected *dénoûment*. Great as were her terror and suspense, Madame Lafrogne could not but admire this rough huntsman—so calm and self-possessed—so entirely the master of himself, and so dignified in such a trying crisis. Involuntarily she compared him with the lover whose vacillating footsteps she still heard on the garden-walk. Was it possible that she had taken such a miserable coward for a hero ? She despised



Xavier ; and shame and disgust overwhelmed her as she remembered that this man's lips had touched her face. In one short moment ridicule had killed her guilty love.

They heard Hyacinthe bolt the garden-gate. Germain then turned toward his wife, who expected, with a sinking heart, an explosion of anger natural to an indignant husband under such circumstances. "Reassure yourself," he said, calmly. "I have neither reproaches nor angry words for you. They would be useless, and I do not wish any scandal. For the honor of our family and our name, I will not have the village gossips gabble about our affairs. We will save appearances ; only you understand, of course, that between us for the future there will be no intimacy and no possible confidence. In fact, we shall be separated to all intents and purposes. I shall arrange to-morrow to live here the greater part of the time ; you will remain in our home at Villotte, and I will take care that you have all you require—"

Laurence made a gesture as if about to speak. He did not give her time to interrupt him, but continued, firmly : "All will be as I say—and I insist on your obedience. You will live at Villotte—Hyacinthe will take you there to-morrow—I have nothing more to say to you."

He opened the door, and went out without even another look at his wife, who had pushed aside the *fauteuil* and rushed toward her husband.



She wished to cast herself at his feet—to implore his pardon ; to pray him to listen to her expressions of shame, regret, and penitence. “Germain !” she cried, imploringly—“Germain !”

But he paid no attention to her—he did not seem even to hear her : he was talking with Hyacinthe in the corridor. A few moments more and she heard him bolt the entrance-door ; then he and his brother ascended the stairs, and the whole house was shortly buried in profound silence, interrupted only by the distant ripple of the river, and the soft, continuous murmur of the crickets in the garden.

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## CHAPTER IX.

THE house of the two Barbels relapsed into a silence that was more profound and more melancholy than that during the reign of Aunt Lénette. The shutters of the windows looking out on the Rue du Bourg remained hermetically sealed except for the space of two hours on each succeeding Saturday, when Catherine dusted the furniture and waxed the floors. The hall-door was not opened twice in the day. The interior, where carpets softened every footstep, was as silent as a cloister, and every one spoke in whispers, as if in a church.

Monsieur Xavier Duprat, like a prudent per-



son, had not waited until the day following his dismissal to remove himself and his belongings from the Lafrogne mansion. He took the first train that night which left for Metz. Once safe in the bosom of his family, he sought refuge in a pretense of illness, and intrusted to a colleague the care of sending him all his books and effects. A week later Germain found the rooms vacated and empty, and at once moved his own books and papers into them ; and there he slept when he was detained unexpectedly by business in town—the remainder of the time he lived at the farm.

As to Laurence, her existence was that of a recluse and a penitent. Her first step had been to dismiss her maid, and content herself with the services of Catherine. Then she executed a grand reform in her wardrobe. She bade farewell to her bewitching toilets, to her knots of ribbon and her laces, and laid aside all the coquettish embellishments which she had so much enjoyed, and had found such pleasure in inventing. She wore a simple dress of black cashmere, close in the throat, and she locked up all her ornaments in her dressing-case.

The furniture in her boudoir and *salon* were enveloped in their coverings ; the brasses and the lustres of rock-crystal were imprisoned in gauze. She lived exclusively in her sleeping-room, where a portrait of Aunt Lénette—an old pastel, with the colors half effaced—seemed to look at her re-



proachfully from morning until night. She saw no one except Hyacinthe, and him only when they met at table, where he sat in melancholy silence, opposite his sister-in-law.

They talked very little, and only when Catherine was in the room ; but when they were *tête-à-tête* the elder of the two Barbels was as mute as one of the fish on his sign. He ate with his nose in his plate ; when, sometimes, Laurence raised her eyes to him with a supplicating look, and he foresaw that she was about to make an appeal to his mercy, he turned away his head, and began a fluent conversation with the cat who was rubbing against his legs. Laurence had not the courage to persist. She comprehended that in Hyacinthe she had a righteously indignant judge ; all the more so, too, because he had been the last to believe her unworthy. After dessert, Hyacinthe, folding up his napkin with punctilious care, invariably arose, went to the barometer, to which he gave two or three little taps, and murmured either, "It will rain to-morrow !" or, "The weather will be fine !" Then he heaved a big sigh, and glided noiselessly from the room.

Germain was rarely present at these repasts—only on those evenings when he was obliged to remain in town—and then the dinner-table was even more lugubrious. Laurence dared hardly to lift her eyes or open her lips ; and, if her husband addressed a word to her, she fancied that each



syllable veiled a bitter or contemptuous meaning. The first time that Germain took his seat at the family table, he sat in gloomy silence until the cloth was removed ; then, as he rose from his chair, he said to Laurence, without looking at her :

“Marianne has been dismissed, it seems.”

“Yes, monsieur,” she answered, timidly; “she was a useless expense. I wish to become accustomed to waiting on myself.”

“Yes,” he answered, in a voice that was full of bitterness—“yes, I see ; the girl could no longer be of use to you. I understand !”

She believed that he thus intimated his belief that Marianne had been her accomplice at Rembercourt, and she began a denial ; but he closed her lips by a quick “That will do !” and left the room with Hyacinthe.

These thrusts from Germain were to her the bitterest of tortures. She felt that he looked upon her as infinitely more guilty than was really the case, and he felt for her the most absolute contempt. Sometimes, humiliated and saddened, she determined to see him and try and justify herself. Then she hesitated. She was afraid. She knew in advance that, as soon as she heard his first sarcastic word of doubt and disapproval, she would lose heart, and would injure the position of things rather than improve it. She concluded, therefore, to keep silent, and bide her time.



She feared, in provoking an explanation, that she should lose her last hope and her last hold, and she wished much to retain both !

She was silent, therefore, not so much from policy or from pride as from a sentiment which was at once more scrupulous and more tender. She determined to regain Germain's esteem, simply because she was beginning to love her husband !

Yes, Laurence loved Germain Lafrogne. The labyrinth of a woman's heart, so complicated and full of tangled paths, has strange turnings and marvelous surprises. Women submit irresistibly to the attraction of strength, and, like Madame Sganarelle, "it pleases them to be beaten."

From the moment that Laurence had seen Xavier quail and turn pale under her husband's eyes, she had no feeling save contempt for that cowardly lover ; and at the same moment her admiration for Germain sprang into being.

Her first idol was thus thrown to the ground and shivered to atoms, but at the same instant a more imposing god appeared in the same place ; but not on the same pedestal, according to the rules of ancient mythology. The *sang-froid* shown by Germain ; the manner in which he had controlled his anger ; the savage grandeur and contempt with which he had dismissed the offender, and the haughty magnanimity he had shown toward Laurence, had, one and all, made a strong impression on his wife. Far from thinking him



now old-fashioned and ridiculous, she watched him with a certain timidity which is the beginning of love in many natures. The rusticity of the rough hunter had, in her eyes, a vivid coloring of reality, which she thought more beautiful than all the romantic sentimentalities that had formerly filled her imagination. She was conquered by the strength of the man, and she suffered cruelly in the knowledge of having offended him. To re-establish herself, therefore, in her husband's esteem was now her one thought and all-absorbing desire. But what steps should she take to convince him and exculpate herself? How should she destroy Germain's preconceived convictions? How should she, with every appearance against her, and with no one to aid her—for even Hyacinthe thought her guilty—convince her husband of her innocence?

She determined, at all events, to demonstrate to the two brothers that she was not the frivolous woman they took her to be; that she was capable of becoming as good a housekeeper and manager as Aunt Lénette. She was not too proud to ask instruction from Catherine; the house was kept with the strictest economy, and, as in the good old days, the two Barbels found their linen in perfect order, and their winter and summer wardrobes always in readiness. Sometimes she shut herself into her room, and interrogated Aunt Lénette's faded portrait, asking the old pastel to inspire



her with a way of bringing back her husband's heart ; but the withered features remained unmoved, and her severe gray eyes seemed to say to the unhappy penitent, " I, too, have no faith in you ! "

One day, when turning over the contents of a secretary, she found a large blank-book with its leaves of greenish paper covered with large handwriting. It was the kind of volume which our fathers used wherein to inscribe both their daily expenses and the events of their domestic lives. All the patriarchal history of the Lafrognes was artlessly narrated up to the hour when mademoiselle had been seized by her last illness. All Germain's life was set down from the day of his baptism.

Laurence ran over these long columns of accounts with the interest she had formerly felt in devouring " Valentine." It seemed to her that in this way she entered more intimately into her husband's personality ; and the perseverance with which she devoted herself to this retrospective reading demonstrated better than anything else how entirely she was ruled by the desire of weighing her thoughts and emotions with those of Germain.

There were a number of blank pages in the volume, which Laurence decided to use. She locked the volume in her desk, and from that time forth inscribed in it all her household expenses.



She went out little—in fact, she was seen only on Sundays at the nine-o'clock mass. The town, of course, was naturally much occupied over the strange changes in the house of the two Barbels. The gossips had smelled out the isolated fact that some strange event had taken place, and they had chattered much over the strange way in which the husband and wife now lived.

Delphin Nivard alone could have given the key of the mystery ; but, as his conscience was by no means clear, and he did not wish to have any personal knowledge of the strength of German's rough grasp, he had put a martingale on his tongue, and contented himself with rolling the knowledge of the mischief he had done as a sweet morsel under his tongue. Weary of their ineffectual efforts to elucidate the mystery, the scandal-mongers gave the matter up, and, when by chance Madame Lafrogne's name arose in the conversation, they shrugged their shoulders. "She has a frightful temper," said one. "I am sorry for her husband," said another. And there they stopped.

As months went on, Laurence had lost both courage and patience. In spite of her twenty years a dull, heavy sorrow darkened the fairest days of the sunny summer which ought to have brought her only happiness. She said to herself that her spring-time had come to naught, and she compared herself mentally to a fruit-tree all cov-



ered with white blossoms struck by a sudden frost, in a chilly night. All was admirably prepared : golden stamens were set closely around the green pistil ; the sharp north wind had passed over them, and all was lost. The white corollas were still on the branches, but a little black spot was all that remained of the pistil ; the frost had done its work. Laurence was more miserable than the tree, for she knew that, if she had missed the promise of the spring-time, it was all her own fault.

For some little time she had flattered herself with the hope that her changed life and her devotion to the house would touch the heart of its master, and that, regarding her penitence as now of long-enough duration, he would soften toward her, and finally pardon her. Now, however, she began to grow desperate. Nearly a year had expired ; the anniversary of the fatal scene was close at hand, and as yet there was no indication of any relenting on Germain's part. He spent his days at Rembercourt superintending his farm, or rushing through the woods like a wild huntsman. Laurence rarely saw him ; he appeared, to be sure, occasionally at Villotte, but his presence there was very brief and infrequent. Sometimes, when her back was turned, he would cast stealthy glances in her direction—glances which were half of tenderness, half of suspicion ; and at table he was often seized by a violent fit of coughing, as if he wished



to strangle a sigh or repress some emotion. He would leave the table abruptly, and retire early to the room formerly occupied by Duprat, and would depart at daybreak.

To catch a glimpse of him Laurence rose at an unheard-of hour, and, hidden behind her curtains, watched her husband's every movement; she followed him with her eyes as he made the rapid toilet of a sportsman. His active, out-of-door life had kept him young; not a silvery hair lurked either in hair or beard. His brown eyes sparkled under their heavy black brows, and Laurence learned to look on him as handsome.

If Germain was unsoftened and pitiless, Hyacinthe had apparently relented. The elder Barbel did full justice to the efforts of his sister-in-law. As he was compassionate by nature, he pitied her, and one evening, when Germain had supped at Villotte, he ventured to approach the subject. "My boy," he said, as he accompanied his brother to his room, "you are too hard on Laurence. I assure you that the child has much that is good in her, and that she is thoroughly repentant; you ought to forgive her. A Christian spirit should practise forgiveness!"

"I have not a Christian spirit," answered Germain, roughly; "I am a husband who has been once basely deceived, and who does not choose to put himself in the way of a second attempt of the same nature. A scalded cat, you know, is afraid even of cold water!"



“But, Germain, you exaggerate the whole affair—I am convinced that you do ; and that you have done so from the beginning. After all we heard of her conversation with that miserable Duprat, it is clear that Laurence was not guilty, that her fault—which, remember, I have no intention of extenuating—was not irremediable ; and in simple justice, besides being a part of our common law, the intention should never be looked upon as an act committed—”

“Do you intend to repeat your special pleading in regard to Pharaoh’s cup and Benjamin’s sack ?” interrupted Germain, sarcastically. “You are not a good lawyer, my poor Hyacinthe. What does it matter if the fault stopped short of being a crime ? One thing is certain, which even you must admit, which is, that Laurence abused my confidence—”

“And you have punished her ; and to-day she is most unhappy and penitent—”

“Unhappy ! And am I not unhappy also ?”

“Possibly ; but perhaps it is only just that we should have our share of suffering, for all the wrong-doing is not on the side of Laurence. We, too, are in fault.”

“Indeed !” cried Germain, sarcastically ; “and in what way are we in fault ? Is it because we took her without one penny, and gave her a comfortable house, in which she lived like a queen ?”

“It is,” answered Hyacinthe, slowly, “that



we took her from selfishness, and not from affection. Come, now, my boy, let us be honest, and admit the fact that, in your marriage, we consulted our interests exclusively, and thought little of hers. Laurence was, in our eyes, simply a house-keeper, better born, better educated, and better bred, than we could hope to obtain in any other way. We did not say to ourselves that she was rich, and we were old; that she needed the amusements and distractions befitting her years, and that we were shutting her up in the four walls of our old house, dear to us, but dreary, possibly, to any one who had not any early associations with it. Now, in my opinion, if we wish to be loved by people, we must love them for themselves, and not alone for the use they may be to us. These are our faults, my boy. They, of course, do not excuse hers; but, according to my humble judgment, they are enough to make us more lenient in our treatment of her. I wished to say this to you to-night, and now I leave you to your own reflections. Good-night!"

"Good-night," grumbled the younger Barbel, as he shut his door.

Germain slept very badly. When he rose the sun just grazed the wall in the court-yard, and the swallows chirped loudly in the eaves. He lighted his pipe, and, throwing open his blinds, sat down by the window to smoke. The house was still buried in slumber. Catherine, dulled by years,



was less alert than of yore, and was late in descending to the kitchen. Opposite, at Madame Lafrogne's window, the curtains were still closely drawn. A cock crowed lustily in the poultry-yard, and the *angelus* was sounding from the Dominican monastery. At this moment, the door of the house opened, and Laurence, wrapped in a gray *peignoir*, with uncovered head and loosely-flowing sleeves, stepped out into the court—into the freshness of the morning. She, too, had slept but indifferently; no longer having a maid, she had acquired the habit of rising very early, and, to save Catherine's old legs, went regularly to the pump for the cool water she needed for her morning ablutions. She went to the green basin, around which grew tufts of *calceolaria*, hung her bucket on the copper spout, and, lifting the heavy iron handle with her slender hands, began to pump slowly.

A recollection of other days came to Germain's sad heart. He remembered the first night Laurence passed at Villotte, and every minute detail of that morning, when he filled her pitcher at that same old pump. She was so pretty in those days, so bright and so gay!—but perhaps her real beauty was greater now. As she stooped and rose again with the handle, the soft folds of her *peignoir* marked the undulating lines of her shoulders and her hips; one of her sleeves fell back and showed the small black mole which had formerly attracted



Germain's admiring attention. The water fell into the bucket with a musical *glou-glou*. Out of breath with her labors, Laurence stopped, and, throwing back her head, lifted her eyes toward the bit of blue sky above her, framed as it were by the roofs and towers around. A light cough, coming from behind one of the blinds in her husband's room, startled her; she colored and dropped her eyes, for she saw the light smoke from Germain's pipe; and, in her turn, she remembered that first morning at Villotte, and the huge pitcher of water so gallantly procured for her by the rough sportsman.

During this time, Germain, half angry with himself for his weakness, thought seriously of going down the stairs and of taking the bucket from his wife and carrying it to her room. His hand was already on the handle of the door. "No," he thought, "I should look like a fool!" and he went back again.

The bucket flowed over and drenched the front of the *peignoir*. Laurence sighed, then snatched up the bucket, and the door closed upon her. "He is pitiless," she said, as she crossed the vestibule; "if he felt the least friendship for me, he would have come down. It is all over—I must give up all hope of his forgiveness, and there is but one course open for me."

All the rest of the day she shut herself in her room with Aunt Lénette's old account-book.



Germain was not there, he had returned to Rembercourt ; that night at supper, just as Hyacinthe left the table and went to his barometer to consult it, Laurence spoke. "I beg your pardon," she said, timidly, "but may I ask you something?"

"Most assuredly, my dear child," answered Hyacinthe.

"Will you take me to the farm to-morrow?"

"To the farm?" he repeated, in great astonishment. It seemed to him the very last place which Laurence would think of revisiting. "To the farm ! and whom do you wish to see there?"

"I wish to speak to my husband—to Monsieur Lafrogne."

"But he was here yesterday. Why did you not take advantage of that occasion ? Why did you not speak to him then ?"

"Because I had not then formed the resolution which to-day I have decided upon, and of which I wish to inform him."

"You shall do as you will, my dear child ; but I must suggest to you that the locality is ill-chosen, and—Germain is by no means amiable."

"I have already thought of that. We will start early, shall we not ?"

"At whatever hour you choose. But is the matter really so urgent ? Can you not wait for a more favorable opportunity ?"

"No—it is impossible. I cannot wait !"

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## CHAPTER X.

NINE o'clock sounded from the church at Fains. The clear notes of the clock passed over the woods, still fresh with the dew of the morning, and entered the open window of Germain's room. But this was not the only sound which found its way in. There were the snapping of the boatmen's whips from the canal, the flutter of wings and the cries of the wild-ducks, and the dull sound of the scythe in the meadow. Germain, with his foot on a chair, was buttoning his gaiters, preparing to depart for a day in the woods, when suddenly he heard the sound of wheels in the court-yard, and he thought he recognized the impatient snorting of the small Corsican ponies that were driven only in his wife's basket-wagon. He started, and listened intently. A few moments more, and a light step—so light that he was not certain that he was not deceived by his imagination—came up the steps. He listened; his ear caught the rustle of a woman's skirts, and some one knocked timidly at his door.

"Come in!" he cried, impatiently.

Laurence appeared on the threshold, still wearing her simple black dress; a light veil covered her face, which was excessively pale, and against her bosom, which rose and fell from agitation and



from her rapid ascent of the stairs, she held a small package wrapped in paper.

"You here !" exclaimed Germain, in profound amazement.

"Hyacinthe is down-stairs," she answered, as if in apology for her presumption ; "I came up alone, because I wished to speak to you in private."

"Come in and shut the door. What do you wish to say to me ?"

"I have come to ask your permission to go away."

"To go away ?" He looked at her in wonder. "And where would you go ?"

"To the only house where I could live without being a burden to any one—to my mother's."

"Ah ! what induces you to believe that you are a burden to any one here ?"

"One is always a burden to people when one eats their bread without being either useful or agreeable. I understand myself and my position perfectly. I know that I have neither your affection nor your respect; that you allow me to remain under your roof only out of regard for public opinion and to avoid scandal !"

"And you think this unjust ?"

"No ; I do not complain. I know that you have a right to behave toward me with far greater severity. Only, you would have been less cruel had you sent me away at once, rather than have brought me to this humiliating condition. My



punishment has been too severe. I was patient for months—because I continually hoped and believed—” She colored and checked herself abruptly as she saw that she was on the point of betraying herself. Germain looked his wife straight in the eyes, as if to read in them the conclusion of her unfinished sentence.

“Go on !” he said ; “what did you believe ?”

“I believed that I should have strength enough to accept your contempt as my punishment—I believed that I could lay aside my natural pride and endure my position, which is neither that of a wife nor of a servant. But I cannot—no, I cannot !”

Her voice trembled ; it was easy to see that she was making a great effort to repress the sobs that were ready to burst from her lips. Germain had turned away his head, and was looking fixedly at the opposite wall.

A long silence ensued. From without came the sound of a scythe sharpened upon a grindstone, and the flies buzzed in the sunny window.

“I am not an utter churl,” answered Germain, in a restrained voice. “I had no intention of keeping you a prisoner here ; and you can go away, if such is your wish.”

“I will leave to-morrow, then. But, before going, I must give you an account of the money which you have intrusted to me for the house.” She opened the package which she held in her



hand, and drew out Aunt Lénette's old account-book. "In this you will find the memoranda of all my expenditures," she continued, "and this is the money I have in hand."

She placed the account-book and a small roll of gold-pieces on the table, while Germain made a gesture of refusal.

"Forgive me," she said, insisting; "I prefer that you should know that all is in order before I leave."

Lafrogne started from his chair, and walked slowly up and down the small room, with his head bowed upon his chest. When his steps brought him near the window, he murmured, without turning toward his wife :

"Is it to-morrow, then—irrevocably?"

"Yes, to-morrow; I will take the ten-o'clock train."

She hesitated for a moment—hoping against hope for one word of kindness from him, and unwilling to depart until he spoke to her; but he did not turn toward her. Tears filled his wife's eyes, but she dared not speak again. With an effort she stammered, "Good-by!" but in so low a tone, and so indistinctly, that it would have been difficult for any one to decide whether it was the beginning of a sob or an attempt at the articulation of a word. Then she opened the door and slowly descended the stairs. A few moments more, and the horses champed their bits,



and the basket-wagon rolled down the avenue. Germain then turned around, his strong features were violently agitated ; he perceived the account-book lying on the table, and, seating himself with a sombre countenance, opened it mechanically. He suddenly felt himself much disturbed by an emotion which betrayed itself by a slight trembling of his lips and of his chin under his curly beard ; he had recognized the old family memorandum-book—the old one with its parchment cover, wherein ancestor after ancestor had inscribed the expenses and remarkable events of his house.

Turning over the leaves, he lighted upon a page at the top of which were these words in Mademoiselle Lénette's handwriting :

“To-day, March 23, 1822, my nephew, Germain Lafrogne, was born.”

It seemed to him that he should discover buried under the dead leaves of many and many a summer all the recollections of his boyhood—since the day when, wearing his first breeches, he had been taken by his aunt to the good Sisters' school, up to that glorious morning when, followed by his dog Phanor, he had gone out, the first time, for a day's shooting.

He turned over the yellow pages. Upon certain words a few grains of blue sand had dried into the writing, and now caught the sunlight on their metallic surface, while for so long a



time the hands which had scattered this dust lay rigid and fleshless under the sand in the cemetery. Germain recognized the coarse writing of his grandfather Thoiré, and the regular slope of his Aunt Lénette. Then, as he turned a leaf, he reached the elegant and flowing characters inscribed by Laurence. By the side of the larger commercial hand these delicately-made letters had the look of dainty flowers bending over a graveled walk. He began to decipher them attentively, forgetting that the day was growing old, and that the sun was streaming into the widely-opened windows.

He noticed, not without a feeling of tender surprise, with what minute and almost pious care the house had been managed during this portion of his wife's reign. Nothing had been neglected or omitted ; she had thought of everything, from the arrangements for the great semi-annual wash to the renewal of the flowers planted around the tomb of Mademoiselle Lénette ; the favorite dishes of Hyacinthe were all set down in order, as well as those of her husband. On every page were indications of her regard for Germain's comfort—the warm clothing prepared and sent to Rembercourt the last of October ; the fresh linen sent out each week to the farm ; even a memorandum was made that certain cold *pâtés*, prepared by Catherine, should be sent out to the farm in readiness for her husband's shooting-parties.



Not a day had passed that some portion of it had not been spent in his service.

He turned the leaves over more and more slowly, until he reached a page where the writing ended half-way down. A few scattered rose-leaves lay there as a signature, they were already half dry, but they breathed still a faint perfume, as faint and sweet as the farewell that Laurence had sighed as she went away an hour ago. And it was all over ! No one would ever again write another line on those unfilled pages. The old book bequeathed by their grandfather to his children, which Laurence had considered it her duty to bring out again, would now be closed once more and forever. And why not ? Such books are only precious in families that are perpetuated, and Hyacinthe and Germain would die without posterity in their melancholy solitude. All was over. Laurence was going away, and with her all that remained of life and cheerfulness in the old house would also go, and the dwelling would once more become the silent home of the two Barbels. They two, some night, would burn the old memorandum-book, lest, when they were gone, it should be sold with a lot of useless paper to some manufacturer, who would make paste-board boxes of leaves covered with the writings of their grandfather, of Aunt L nette, and of little Laurence !

No one could see anything that was going on



in that little room so high up—no one, at least, except the birds in the fruit-trees opposite, or the swallows which flew past the windows. No indiscreet eyes, therefore, could detect the tears which slowly dropped from Germain's eyes, and buried themselves in his heavy beard. Besides, his head was dropped low upon the book, as if to conceal his emotion from the very birds in the garden. His face was so close to the yellow pages, so close, that suddenly his lips were pressed to the dry rose-leaves. The rough huntsman had kissed the page !

During this time the basket-wagon, with its Corsican ponies, was rapidly taking Hyacinthe and Laurence back to Villotte. They exchanged few words on their way. The elder of the two Barbels uttered an occasional profound sigh, and Madame Lafrogne struggled with her tears. As soon as they had reached the Rue du Bourg, Laurence wrote to her mother, and prepared for her departure. She would carry away only her modest trousseau ; and her trunks were soon packed. Toward evening she gave her last directions to Catherine, and begged her brother-in-law to come up and help her to fasten the straps on her boxes.

While the brave Hyacinthe, much disturbed, but not daring to oppose a departure which had been approved by Germain, knotted the cords in the most careful and conscientious manner, Lau-



rence was placing labels on all the keys of the wardrobes.

"Everything is in order," she said, when Hyacinthe had finished his task. "Here are the keys; they are all numbered, and you will have no difficulty in finding anything you want."

She held the bunch toward her brother-in-law, but Lafrogne's fingers were so stiff and benumbed that the keys fell noisily on the floor.

This noise was so loud that they did not either of them hear a knock at the door. The handle turned, and Germain, all red, sunburned, and dusty, entered the room. He looked at the corded boxes arranged along the wall. "So," he said to Laurence, who had grown very pale, "you have decided to go?"

"Yes, I must!" she stammered.

"Ah! well," he cried, "in that case we will go together. It is not proper that my wife should travel alone."

Madame Lafrogne's black eyes opened widely. She trembled, and dared not accept the evidence of her ears; but Hyacinthe understood instantly, and shook his brother's hands eagerly.

"That is right, my boy!" he exclaimed. "Now, kiss her!"

Laurence threw herself into her husband's arms, and, burying her head on the broad breast of her rough sportsman, burst into tears.

Laurence and Germain traveled for five



months. When they returned to Villotte, in December, the emotion caused by all the events which we have related had had time to calm down, and the husband and wife quietly took possession of their house in the Rue du Bourg.

Monsieur Xavier Duprat never again appeared at Villotte ; but the disagreeable adventure which had marked his *début* in that little town did not by any means prevent him from making his way in the world. He belonged to the school of those young lawyers who combine self-sufficiency with artifice, and who, having more ambition than principle, are never hampered by their opinions or by their consciences. In 1871 he found in the ministry, and among the National Assembly, some old friends whose influence was all-powerful, and by whose aid he was able to obtain a position as *procureur*, while waiting for something better.

His eloquence and strict propriety were in great favor in the court-room at X—— ; and, when he delivered a speech in a trial for adultery, the denunciations of this inflexible magistrate made the guilty parties shiver in their seats, and impressed the jury to a marvelous extent. Occasionally, honest Hyacinthe, who retained the habit of looking over the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, would come across one of these virulent speeches of Monsieur le Procureur Duprat, and the perusal of the pompous phrases upon “the perversion of



contemporary manners, and the contempt shown for the sacred laws of honor and morality," would put him out of humor for the rest of the day. His face grew scarlet with indignation, as he exclaimed aloud, throwing down the unfortunate journal: "Hypocrite! vile sycophant!"

Fortunately, the elder of the two Barbels found in his home, in the Rue du Bourg, sweet compensations for any bitter drops in his cup.

He has become an uncle, for, some five months after the return of his brother and his wife, Laurence gave birth to a boy, whom they named Claude, in memory of his grandfather. The child was borne to the baptismal font by Hyacinthe and Madame de Coulaines. The boy is healthy and vigorous, and there is every indication that the name of Lafrogne will not disappear from the civil list.

Thanks to him, too, the house of the two Barbels is once more filled with childish laughter, a sound which, for forty years, had been unheard in its long corridors and lofty rooms.

Hyacinthe has grown young again; and when, on sunny mornings, he takes the infant in his arms and walks up and down the pavement before the façade on the Rue du Bourg, the sirens under the windows and the cherub over the door seem also to be rejuvenated by the arrival of the youthful guest. They welcome him gayly



from the heights of their leafy capitals ; and the baby, radiant with delight and wonder, exchanges smiles with those strange, chubby faces, whose mouths stretch with merry laughter from ear to ear.

THE END.



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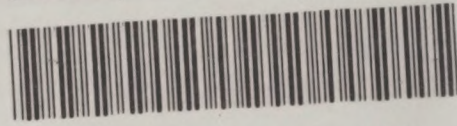








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